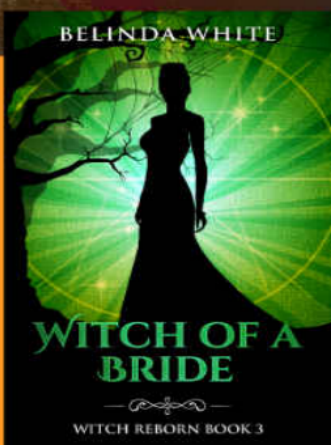
BELINDA WHITE

WITCH REBORN BOX SET BOOKS 1-3

INCLUDES GEMSTONE COVEN HOLIDAY SHORTS 1 & 2



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Witch Reborn

Books 1-3

(Includes Gemstone Coven Holiday Shorts 1 & 2)

A Very Opal Halloween

Witch of a Godmother

Witch of a Sister

Witch of a Bride

A Very Happy Halloween Birthday

Belinda White

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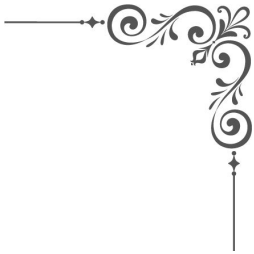

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A Very Opal Halloween

A Gemstone Coven Holiday Short

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By Belinda White

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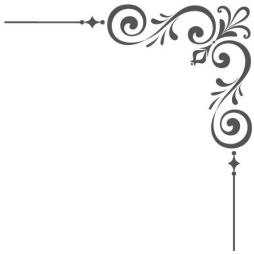

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A VERY OPAL HALLOWEEN

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Chapter 1

“OKAY, SO SPILL. WHY’S Opal wanting to do a seance on All Hallows’ Eve?”

“Maybe because that’s when the veil between the worlds is the thinnest?”

I could imagine Amie’s look right now. All I could do was imagine, unfortunately. I really needed to get some type of visual with this listening spell. Turn it into an audio and visual type of thing. That would help with the clarity issue. But still, as well as I knew those girls, I probably didn’t need it.

Right about now Amie was glaring at my daughter, Ruby, with what she thought was the signature Ravenswind stare. She was getting better at it, but she still had a long way to go to get it right.

“You know what I mean. We’re in our twenties, and we have yet to do a single seance that I remember. So, why now? What is it that your mom wants from Grand?”

“You think I know?”

“Okay, so what’s your best guess?”

Right about now, Ruby would be chewing on her lip. That was her thinking mode. The girl was lucky to have any lip left.

“Well, seances are pretty creepy, so it would have to be something big, right?” There was silence for a minute. “Oh, have you seen Grand’s spellbook since she passed? Maybe it’s missing or something.”

I had to smile. I had kind of figured that would be their first guess. There was really no reason for me not to tell them, but I wanted to have a little fun with it. They’d never guess in a million years what I wanted from my mother. The one thing that she had failed to pass on to me that I craved with a burning passion. I needed it, dang it all. Enough to do a stupid, and yes creepy, seance.

“Auntie?”

I looked up from the table to find Nancy standing in front of me with a question in her eyes. Taking off my spelled headphones, I smiled at her.

“Good morning, Nancy. Are you ready for breakfast?”

“I could eat.” That particular somewhat squeaky voice didn’t come from Nancy. No, that was Bridget, my Macaw and my familiar.

I looked over at her. “You know where your food is if you’re hungry.”

Nancy giggled as Bridget gave me a stare. A better version of the Ravenswind look than Amie had been able to master yet, if you ask me. “Want a cracker.”

“Can I give her one, Auntie?”

I nodded. “Just one though. She doesn’t need to stuff herself with treats. She’s not as young as she used to be.”

“Who’s a pretty girl?”

Nancy handed her a small treat and gave her a light scratch under the chin. “You are, Bridget.”

I held my breath and gave Bridget a glare of my own. Her beak opened, but when she saw my look, it closed again. I’d been expecting her to come out with her latest phrase. “Damn right.” But we’d had a long talk about her using that in front of Nancy. It wouldn’t do for the girl to pick up curse words from us.

The paperwork to make her stay with us a more permanent one hadn’t gone through yet. That meant we all had to be on our toes for a while longer. We just couldn’t risk a mark against us. As if being known witches wasn’t enough of one to make things more difficult already.

“I’m thinking pancakes and sausage. Sound good?” I figured that would be a sure-fire yes as it combined both of Nancy’s favorite breakfast foods.

She nodded, but she seemed distracted.

“Is everything okay?”

Nancy hesitated. “Can I ask you a question? It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.”

“You can ask me anything, child. If it’s in your best interest that I answer, I will. You should know that by now.” I started walking out into the hallway and across to Sapphire’s old apartment. With my sister back living with her new husband, Nancy and I had kind of taken over the whole downstairs of the farmhouse.

She followed me. “What happens to Dad’s old trailer?”

That one almost tripped me up. Literally. My foot fumbled just the slightest little bit. I was hoping that she didn’t notice.

I waited until we were in the much larger kitchen to answer. “Well, they didn’t find a will, so everything the man had should go to you. I was thinking you’d probably want to sell it for whatever you could get out of it and maybe put it toward college or something.”

There was a moment’s silence, and it took a lot of willpower not to stop what I was doing and look at her. But I didn’t want to make this a big deal. It was a tricky subject. To give us both a little time, I started putting away the ingredients I'd left out from last night's eggnog experiment. Another failed one.

“You didn’t want to keep it, did you?”

I saw her shudder out of the corner of my eye. Yeah, I didn't think so.

"Actually, I was kind of wondering if I could give it away." Nancy reached up and grabbed a mixing bowl out of the cabinet while I pulled the ingredients out of the pantry. We'd done this enough times to separate out the chores.

"Got someone in particular in mind to give it to?"

She nodded. "Yes. My friend Kimberly lives a couple of trailers down from Dad's trailer. But her home isn't even as nice as ours was. It's really just a camping trailer. She doesn't even have hot water." The blood started rising in her cheeks. "I used to sneak her in while Dad was gone so she could take a hot shower."

I had to give my next words some thought. Nancy was young, but she'd been through a lot in her eleven years of life. In a lot of ways, she was as old as I was. A soul aged far too quickly.

"Truthfully, right now everything is probably in limbo. Until the court gets off its... behind... and officially appoints you a guardian, you probably couldn't make it a legal transaction." Her face fell. "That doesn't mean that we couldn't start cleaning the place up and trying to get it ready for when they do."

Her eyes flew to mine. "You'd help me?"

"We'll all help you. In fact, if you aren't comfortable being there, we'll just flat out do it for you. It's what family does, kiddo."

Nancy whirled around at Ruby's statement, but I just laughed. "I knew you two would show up soon." I gave Nancy a quick wink. "You aren't the only one who likes my pancakes."

She giggled and a little of the tension eased off. Stepping up onto her footstool, she started mixing the batter. It was hard to let her do it when it just made a bigger mess, but letting her help was the important part.

"Oh, I'm okay helping with it." She hesitated, the spoon slowing briefly. "As long as someone is there with me."

"That isn't a problem, Nancy," Amie said reaching into the fridge for a small packet of blueberries. She held them up to me, and I nodded. Then she dumped them into the batter. "And if you want, I can look in my legal books and see what the process would be for you to give it away. As the legal heir, you should have that right."

"Thanks, Amie. That would mean a lot."

In a matter of minutes, there were two tall stacks of pancakes and a large plate of sausage links ready for the eating. We settled down at Sapphire's table and dug in. Dang if those blueberries didn't really make the griddle cakes pop. I'd have to remember that for next time.

"So, Nancy, now that you've managed to do something Amie and I never could and got Mom to agree to let us have a real Halloween

party, we need to get together and plan it all out. It's only a few days away, you know."

Amie nodded. "Yup, lots to do to get ready too." Then she paused, and I braced myself. The girls weren't nearly as sleek as they thought they were. "Do you guys remember that spell Grand did that time with the bedsheets and the levitation chant? She had the whole town convinced that the graveyard was haunted."

"I remember that!" Ruby said. Then she looked over at Nancy. "I wish you could have met Grand. She was really something. That year the kids were complaining that nothing ever happened on Halloween and that if the Ravenswind witches were worth their salt, Halloween would be a lot more fun."

"Not sure if peeing yourself could be considered fun for them, but watching them run sure was fun for us," I agreed. "You know, they never complained about boring Halloweens around here after that."

Ruby nodded. "I know, right? I was wondering if we could use that spell, or maybe a toned-down version of it, for the haunted trail leading up to the bonfire at the clearing. I mean, she had to have written it down in her spellbook, right?"

I took another bite to hide my smile. I'd known it was coming, but they had made pretty short work of it all the same. Chewing extra slowly, I let them stew for a minute or so.

"I'm sure she did." Then I paused to take a drink of juice. They probably thought they were being very clever indeed, but I saw the quick glance between the two of them. The art of being subtle wasn't exactly a known Ravenswind trait. "In fact, I'll stop by the safe deposit box and take a look for you. It could be a fun one to use that night. With a few modifications, anyway."

Amie took a deep breath. "Okay, then, that's settled. And after the bonfire, when the rest of the guests leave, we all have our little seance to try to contact Grand, right?"

Like I said, subtlety wasn't prominent with us.

"That's the plan," I said, smiling. "But if either of you girls knows of a good thirteenth person for that last event, please let me know." I nodded at Amie. "And yes, Opie and his dad have already agreed to stay for it. Just need one more for a good, witchy number."

I could tell from their expressions no one jumped to mind for them either. Ah well. With the power we had in our combined family and friends, along with the thinning of the veil on All Hallows' Eve, we still should be able to reach Mom.

If not, I was doomed to yet another unfulfilled year of desperate craving.

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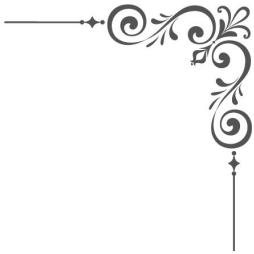

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Chapter 2

MONDAY MORNING DAWNED bright and early, and I was not one bit closer to solving the dilemma of the thirteenth seance guest. I pushed the nagging thought to one side and went about my normal start of the day routine.

We'd pretty much gotten it down to a science of sorts. Once school had started back, and the shop had reopened, it had taken a bit of work to get all the wrinkles ironed out. But now pretty much every school day morning was the same.

We rose, we ate a quick meal of cereal and fruit, and Ruby and I dropped Nancy off at school on our way to work. With all the crazy things that had happened to our family in the last few months, the shop's hours had been cut. Now we were open from eight to four every day, and our only evening hours were on Thursday. If any local witches needed anything outside of those hours, and they were in desperate need, they knew to come to the farmhouse. We'd sell from our private stock if need be to help them out.

I was a bit excited at the thought of Halloween looming only a few days away. That seance had better work. I'd waited for this long enough. It still kind of irked me that Mom had left this world without passing that little item on. She'd known how much it meant to me.

The morning and early afternoon passed by rather briskly as the shop was always busy at the first of the week with witches restocking from a weekend of spelling and potions. But by around three, things had slowed down.

"Ruby, if you'll be okay for a bit here alone, I might run over to the Flour Pot and see if I can order some pastries for the bonfire. I want to make sure we have a good variety for the adults. I know the kids will mostly go for the candy, but it would be nice to have something for everyone."

When we'd posted the flyers about our little event, we'd made it plain that any children under the age of twelve had to be accompanied by an adult. Not that we planned to scare the crap out of them—well, at least I didn't plan to—it was just safer that way. Having Sheriff Taylor and his young son Opie helping out was a big relief too. That should keep things from getting too out of hand.

"That's cool." Ruby paused for a minute. "And it really would be nice to have that spell of Grand's if you have time to stop by the

bank."

I nodded and left. Unfortunately, I didn't quite make it down the street to the little coffee shop before my phone rang.

A glance at the number brought a frown on. Amie didn't generally call me.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Aunt Opal. Is Nancy by chance with you?"

My heart skipped a beat or two. "No, she should have come home on the bus. Is she not there?"

"No, and the bus drove by about ten minutes ago. It didn't even stop."

That wasn't good. "I know the bus driver. I'll give her a call and see if I can find out what's going on."

"Should I start looking for her?"

"No. You need to stay there in case she comes home. If she does, give me a quick call as soon as you can."

I hung up without preamble and dialed Fannie McGuire, the local bus driver. As small as Wind's Crossing was, we only had the one. Came in handy in times like this.

"Fannie, was Nancy on the bus tonight? Amie just called and said you didn't stop to let her out at the farmhouse."

After listening to her for a minute, I felt my face set. I wasn't happy, but I thanked her for letting me know and hung up. Nancy had gone to the trailer park instead of the farmhouse. Without telling me. That last part was the part that had me the most upset.

I was starting to regret my decision not to let her have a cell phone. That was a ruling I might have to relent on very soon. As it was, my only option now was a quick drive over to get her.

The small park was just as depressing as ever. Although knowing that Nancy no longer had to call the place home helped that a little. At least I'd gotten her out of there.

It didn't take long to find her. She was playing in a small yard with a younger boy. He looked to be about five or six. When she heard the car coming down the small gravel lane, she looked up. I could see her swallow from here.

I parked the car by the small camper's mailbox and took a deep breath. It had been a while since I'd had to handle a younger child's insubordination. I'd grown used to dealing with more adult problems. I tried telling myself that at least she was safe, but it still ticked me off that she had come here without telling me. Or anyone, for that matter.

As I climbed out of the car, a young woman came out of the camper. I was guessing that was Nancy's friend Kimberly. I'd expected someone much older, to be honest about it. This girl couldn't have been over eighteen. Far too young to be on her own with a young

child and, from the looks of it, another one soon to make its way into the world.

The woman saw me coming and put herself between me and Nancy.

"It's not her fault."

Huh. She was protecting her. In my eyes, that said a lot about the woman's integrity, and maybe more than a little about their past together. Nancy had needed all the protection she could get when her worthless father had been alive. But now things were different.

"I'm not Jefferson, you know. I'm not going to hurt the child." I looked past her to Nancy. "But I am more than a little perturbed that she came here without at least telling me. I was worried when the bus didn't drop her off at home."

"Again, it's not her fault. Well, she should have called you, but little Mason, my boy there, convinced her that I needed help." She turned to Nancy and smiled. "Nothing could have stopped her from coming to me if she thought I needed help."

"Did you?"

She hesitated. "Maybe a little. I'm running low on food, and my food stamps don't renew for another week. I'm not so worried about me, but..."

I followed her eyes to the young boy. She really didn't need to finish that sentence.

"I'm guessing the boy's father isn't around to help you out?"

She gave a short laugh. "That would be a really good guess." She motioned back toward the camper behind her. "His idea of help was dumping us off here. But at least I don't have to pay rent. Good thing too. I'm having a hard enough time just keeping the lights on. People don't want to hire someone who's water might break at any minute. Plus, my next-door babysitter went and got a better life, thank God."

I nodded. "You have a point there." I gave Nancy a pointed stare. "You know you could have come home and told us what was going on. Then we could have made a trip to the store before rushing over here."

She wouldn't meet my eyes. "Mason didn't exactly know what was wrong." Then her little chin came up a bit. "But I did help. A little, anyway. There was some food in the pantry in our trailer. And I wanted to drop off the key so she could... well, use the trailer whenever she needed to."

Kimberly reached over and gave the girl a quick squeeze. "Yup, I think we can make it now."

There was more to the whole needing help thing. Something else was bothering her. Something I could tell she didn't want to discuss around the kids. I respected her even more by the minute.

I looked up at Kimberly. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to offer me a glass of water? I’m pretty parched.”

She looked relieved, giving me a sad smile. “Sure, follow me.” Then she looked down at the little boy. “Hey, Mason, have you shown Nancy your little garden yet?”

Once the kids had headed back behind the camper, she led me inside. I was actually pleasantly surprised. It was tiny and there wasn’t much in the way of furniture, but it was clean. The young mother was doing the best she could. That said a lot about a person.

“Did you really want that water?”

“Not really, but I guessed that there was something you needed that you didn’t want to talk about with the kids present.”

Tears came to her eyes, and she sank onto one of the cushions of the small love seat. “Oh, Opal, I don’t know what to do. I’m going to go into labor any time now, and not a single soul has stepped forward to say they’ll watch Mason.” She wiped her eyes. “I know it was wrong of me to count on someone so very young, but I was really hoping Nancy would be here to help me. Now… well, I’m just not sure I can do this on my own.”

I might not need that glass of water, but at this point, she did. I made my way into the small kitchenette and poured a glass, then took it to her. “Drink and breath. We don’t want junior coming out any sooner than absolutely necessary, now do we?”

She shook her head and drank a few sips. It seemed to calm her down a little, even if the tears didn’t exactly stop altogether.

“As for going it alone, you won’t be.” I glanced around but didn’t see a phone. “Do you have a cell phone?”

“Not anymore. Between a phone and paying school fees… well, who really needs a phone, anyway? Who do I have to call?”

For starters, maybe an ambulance when that water finally broke, but I didn’t really want to point that part out. I was sure that by now she’d already thought of that. No sense rubbing it in.

“How long would it take for you to pack a bag for you and Mason? Enough to last you a few days?”

Her chin came up. “I may need help, but I’m not asking for charity.”

I grunted. “And I ain’t offering it, either. But there’s a whole apartment at the farmhouse that isn’t being used right now, and it’s silly for you not to stay there. At least until after the baby comes and you get released from doctor’s care. It won’t cost us a dime more to have you there, and if you feel inclined to help out, I could use some help at the shop. This time of year is always super busy there.”

She was still hesitating.

“Look. I know within reason that you were there for Nancy when I

couldn't be. I appreciate that more than I can tell you. So let me show you instead. Consider this Karma for doing right by her."

Kimberly swallowed, then finally nodded. "I'll pack up our food and some clothes."

"Leave the food, unless it will spoil. We have plenty of food at the farmhouse. Just bring what you need... and maybe a few of the boy's favorite toys too."

She stood to start packing.

"Would it be okay with you if I went ahead and told the kids? I could tell that Nancy seemed pretty worried about you." I gave her a wry smile. "She had to be to come here without letting me know."

"I really am sorry about that." She paused and returned my smile. "Or then again, maybe I'm not. You've given me hope, Opal Ravenswind. I wasn't too sure about you, you know. The town is pretty much divided as to whether your family comes down on the side of good or evil. I'd say you've put that question to rest in my mind, at least."

There wasn't much to say to that, so I walked out. And almost ran smack into Nancy who didn't move quite fast enough away from her listening spot at the front door. She threw her little arms around me, crying.

"Thank you, Auntie."

I looked over to Mason who was totally distracted watching something crawl along the ground. Most likely a woolly worm this time of year. Kids loved them. And yes, I was trying to distract myself too.

I was far too close to tears myself.

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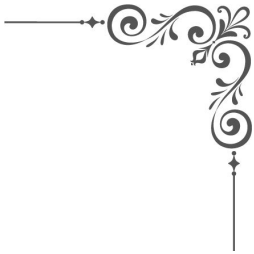

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Chapter 3

IT'S TRUE THAT THE Goddess works in mysterious ways.

I'd thought that she had led us to Kimberly because she needed our help. Over the next few days, I had to rethink that. She wasn't the only one that had needed help.

I had too. I just hadn't known it. I'll admit that I'm a little hardcore when it comes to asking for help. That didn't stop Kimberly, though. I didn't have to ask with her. She just did.

Personally, I was kind of hoping Amie and Ruby were taking notes from her.

For starters, when I went to order the pastries for our All Hallows' Eve Haunted Trail and Bonfire, the Flour Pot told me they couldn't take my order. They were booked solid. That's what you get when you plan something at the last minute around a major holiday. Live and learn.

If it had been up to me, it would have been store-bought cookies and bottled water. But no, Kimberly took control over the refreshments table. Of a day, she helped in the shop, and then of a night instead of putting her feet up as most pregnant women as far along as she was would do, she baked. And baked. And baked.

In the space of two days, there were dozens of cupcakes and cookies. Enough to feed almost the entire town of Wind's Crossing. I was really hoping we didn't have tons of leftovers. I'd gain twenty pounds if we did.

But Kimberly said I was underestimating the turnout we'd get. I hoped she was right. In the very beginning, we'd decided to charge for the trail and bonfire. After all, things like this cost money to put on and candy isn't all that cheap. Each kid in attendance would come out with a bucket of candy—literally. And we even provided the buckets.

The adults would have some quality time with their kids and now, thanks to Kimberly, load up on goodies themselves around the bonfire. It was shaping up to be a fun time for all.

And I really had to hand it to Sapphire for her idea about how to handle the candy supply. I mean, how do you buy ahead if you have no idea how many kids are going to show up? Her solution was simple and nothing less than brilliant. Each child's admission was the price of one ticket. Each adult's admission (over the age of twelve) was a bag of candy to replenish the stock.

Like I said. Brilliant.

Surprisingly, I found myself looking forward to it. At the very least, it was a distraction for what we had planned afterward. The public event started at six in the evening and ended at nine. Our reasoning was that it was a school night, and the kids needed to be home and in bed by nine-thirty at the latest. We didn't want teachers with grumpy kids hating us the next morning.

What we hadn't told Kimberly was that we'd had a family meeting and the money we collected would be going to her. I was hoping that we collected enough to get her some nicer used furniture and stock Nancy's old trailer with food to last for a few months. Once she was able to leave the farmhouse, of course. We weren't going to push her out the minute she had her baby, but it also wasn't a permanent solution.

Her working at the shop, however, might be.

That had held yet another pleasant surprise for me. The customers loved her. And with her running the front part of the shop with the antiques and more normal of our items, it freed up Ruby and me to work in the magic lab we had set up in the back.

Both of us were licensed level five witches in spellcraft and potions. That meant we could legally sell our work. And for a good price too. We just hadn't really had the time to devote to stocking up our witchy wares. Now we did. If things continued as they'd started, employing Kimberly would be a very profitable situation. She was more than earning her salary. In fact, if things kept going, there would be a nice little raise involved. Or maybe a profit share kind of thing. We'd work it out somehow.

"Hey, Mom, can I ask you a favor?"

We were currently working on a rather tricky potion. It had me more than a little distracted. Which was when Ruby tended to ask me things that I might not say yes to at a more normal time. The girl was no dummy.

"You can ask."

She paused. "I was kind of thinking of using the bonfire as a way to really remember Grand, you know? I remember she used to dress us all up as television-style witches to give out the candy. Amie and I still have our costumes, and we're going to wear them tonight. But I was thinking if I wore Grand's broach, it would be kind of like a part of her was there, you know?"

Ah, so that was what this was about. Yet another guess as to why I was holding the seance. I didn't even bother to hide my smile.

"If you want to wear Grand's broach, you're going to need a shovel."

Ruby blanched. "She was buried with it?"

I nodded. “Seemed fitting. She always wore it in life. Didn’t really feel right making her go through death without it.”

She swallowed. “I guess you’re right.”

I could see the wheels spinning and waited. But nothing followed.

We finished up the potion and got it all bottled up. Then the rush started, and we were kept more than busy handling the back end of the shop until close. Seemed like I wasn’t the only one that waited until the last minute sometimes. Witches from near and far came through our back door in droves seeking the harder to find ingredients for their spellwork. Tonight would be a busy night for all, it seemed.

At four-fifteen, we had to literally close the door in a few faces and lock up. Normally, I’d stay until the last customer was served. Not tonight. I’d miss the bonfire if I did. And I wasn’t about to do that. Money was one thing. Family and friends were another.

We had one stop to make on our way home. The market for drinks. I’d arranged for the owner to chill several cases of sodas and water for us. The hope was that we could set them up once we got home and that the cool night air would help keep them cold enough. We just didn’t have the refrigerator space at home.

As we passed the refrigerated section, I noticed the store had already brought in their eggnog. Non-alcoholic, of course. Shouldn’t even be called eggnog in my opinion. I’d tried it once, even added my own rum to it. Left me sorely disappointed.

To say that hustle was involved in the next hour and a half would be the understatement of the year. We all worked our hind ends off with last-minute preparations.

Luckily, Amie had most of the hard stuff already done when we got home. And Opie and Sheriff Taylor arrived just after us and pitched in too. Good thing, as people started showing up early.

We looked at each other and shrugged, then let them in. The haunted trail and bonfire was officially open for business.

Which, of course, was when Kimberly’s water broke.

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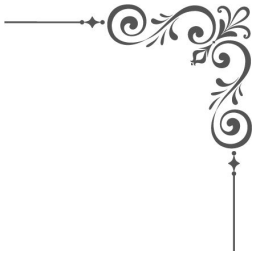

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Chapter 4

IT TOOK SOME DOING, but we finally convinced Nancy to stay behind. The crowning point in our argument was that a hospital room was no place for a five-year-old. And if Nancy went, Mason would demand to go too. Truth was that a hospital room wasn't any place for an eleven-year-old, either, but at least that wasn't an argument we had to have.

We got lucky in that Sheriff Taylor had brought his squad car to the party in hopes of stopping any mischief before it happened. It had been a good thought, but we'd have to take a chance on the mischief. We needed that siren. Plus, a squad car running lights can go a heck of a lot faster than regular cars. And with zero risk of being pulled over. Win-win, that.

He made it to the hospital in Oak Hill in record time. I was kind of figuring he took some risks he wouldn't normally have taken for the pure and simple reason that he didn't want to have to personally deliver the baby. Not that I blamed him. I'd have probably gone even faster.

A midwife I ain't.

At the risk of sounding extremely self-centered, I had been planning on seeing her signed in and wheeled away, and then heading back to the farmhouse. After all, I'd only known the girl for a matter of days and a delivery room is a very private affair.

She, however, had other wishes.

"Will you stay with me?"

One look in her terrified eyes and I couldn't very well say no, now could I? "I'm not family. They might not let me."

The nurse overheard me. "If she wants you in there, you can be in there. It's as simple as that."

I looked over at the sheriff. "Looks like I'm staying then. You going on back?"

He shook his head. "I'll hang around for a bit. Opie sent me a text saying that they recruited Tommy Hill and Mabel Morgan to help out with the haunted trail, so they should be covered there."

I blew out a breath. That part had been worrying me. Then I turned to Kimberly. "Okay then, you've got yourself a coach. Let's do this thing."

She gave me a scared smile. "Do I have a choice?"

“Well, she got in there somehow, and she’s gotta get out somehow, so I guess the answer to that is nope. No choice.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too.” Then her voice lowered. “Thank you for staying. I’m really scared to do this alone. Last time, I had Mom with me, and it helped.”

That stumped me. If her mom was still around then why had she been living like she had? “You want me to call her for you?”

She shook her head as the nurse started wheeling her down the hall. “She kind of wrote me off when she found out who the father of this one was. Like it was my fault, and I seduced him or something.”

I’d kind of been wondering about that. I’d had Amie do a little research and digging trying to figure out who the father was. I’m of the belief that they have a right to know they’ve brought life into the world. And a responsibility to do right by it too. She hadn’t found anything out for certain, but the chances were really good that Kimberly’s stepfather had taken liberties he shouldn’t have.

It looked like that was more of a certainty now. The man would have a Karma spell to look forward to in the next few days. Heck, maybe the mother too. What kind of mother would disown her own daughter in that situation? The husband should have been the one to go. With a boot up his heiny too.

Kimberly seemed to be waiting for me to say something. “Well, I might not be blood relation, but I’m a friend. I’ll stay right there with you for as long as they let me, I promise.”

As it happened, things had changed greatly since Sapphire and I had given birth to Amie and Ruby. Back then, it was an ultra-private affair and sometimes they didn’t even allow the father in to see the birth. Now, apparently, that was no longer the case. I had been expecting her to be wheeled to a regular hospital room until time for the actual delivery. That didn’t happen.

The room we ended up in was a suite. A nice one. Hospital room and delivery room all rolled into one. She wouldn’t be moved into a regular room until the baby was here, and they were both doing well.

Too late to back out now. I was in this thing. I’d never been on the side of a delivery bed before. But I kept telling myself this was a good thing. I could totally consider it practice for when Ruby finally decided to grant me a grandchild. That would be one delivery room they would have a very hard time keeping me out of.

The sheriff stayed until we were settled in, at least for the most part. When he saw them start to wheel in all the necessary equipment, he went pale and made to skedaddle. Not that I blamed him for that. Kind of wished I could skedaddle myself.

But right before he left, he turned back to me. “You really okay with missing tonight’s big event?” His voice was so low that I was

pretty sure Kimberly couldn't hear it back in her bed.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "If the Goddess had wanted me to go through with it, she would have kept that water in place for another few hours. Seems to me that getting my little talk with Mom just wasn't meant to be tonight." I shrugged. "Maybe next year she'll be on my side."

He still hesitated. "What exactly are you wanting to talk to her about? Do you have questions about the other side?"

I laughed. "And ruin the surprise? Heck, no." I looked him in the eyes. "And you're just going to have to wait like all the others." After all, if their curiosity was sated now, they might not feel such a need to attend the seance if and when it finally happened. And I needed as many as I could get to ensure the dang thing worked. Spirit power multiplied was a good thing sometimes.

He shook his head and then did something he'd never done in public before. He kissed me. Then, with his forehead resting on the top of my head he whispered. "You've got this. I'll be in the waiting room if you need me." And he left.

I turned back to Kimberly who was getting prepped for the long haul. I was really hoping it wouldn't be all that long, actually. Goddess, make this a quick one. An easy one too, for that matter. Or as easy as childbirth could be, anyway.

I took a good, deep breath and wished one final time that all this could have waited another twelve hours. Then I pushed that thought aside and walked back to her bed.

I'd trusted the Goddess this far. I wasn't about to start doubting her now.

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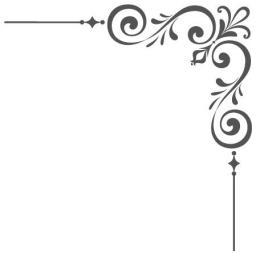

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Chapter 5

KIMBERLY'S LITTLE GIRL was born at preciously ten o'clock on All Hallows' Eve. All seven pounds and twenty-one inches of her. The first sight of her literally took my breath away. Ruby and Amie, Goddess love them, had turned into very beautiful young ladies. But as newborns? Yeah, not so much so.

This little being was gorgeous the instant she entered the world. Even more so after they got her cleaned up a bit.

But the breathtaking part? Well, that was when she looked directly into my eyes and smiled. Goddess help me, but I'd seen those eyes and that smile before. I came very close to fainting on the spot. But I didn't.

I'm not sure I ever truly believed in reincarnation up until that very moment in time. I'd always believed in the possibility of it, just was never convinced it ever really, you know, actually happened. Now I was a believer.

The tiny eyes were bright with the wisdom of the ages, and then they clouded and weren't. The expression changed from one of wisdom to a simple, newly born child. But it didn't undo what I'd seen.

Once the nurses had the baby all cleaned up and pronounced her healthy and whole, they gave her to Kimberly. If I'd had any doubts at all about the girl, they were put to rest when I saw her eyes light on her baby. She'd be a good mom. And we'd all be there to help what we could along the way.

If I stayed there any longer, I knew I wouldn't be able to fight the tears I felt coming on. It wouldn't do to show signs of weakness. As the eldest of the Ravenswind family, I had to be strong. Always. There was no place for tears in my life.

I stepped out and walked slowly down to the waiting room, taking the time each step gave me to get my emotions into check. It was a struggle, but by the time Sheriff Taylor came into sight, the pressing need to cry had passed. Somewhat.

But the man somehow knew all the same. He was good about that. He gathered me into his arms, and we stood there in silence for a minute.

Finally, he asked. "Everything okay?"

I nodded into his shoulder. "Yes. Healthy and whole, beautiful

baby girl. And Kimberly's doing fine too."

He didn't take his arms away. He was good. It would be up to me to end the closeness. Something I was finding it very hard to do right now.

Then I thought about Nancy and the ones back home. Pulling away from him, I wiped my moist eyes.

"I'd better call Nancy, or I'll never hear the end of it."

He grinned at me. "You've got that right."

In a matter of seconds, I had her on the line. "I figured you wouldn't be in bed yet."

"Are you kidding me? I almost had Amie convinced to bring me to the hospital. If you'd waited five more minutes, we'd have probably been on the road."

That sounded about right. Nancy could be very persuasive when she wanted to be. Persistent too. "Well, there isn't any need to come tonight. Mother and daughter are going to need some good rest after the night they've had. I'll bring you to see them tomorrow after school. Deal?"

"Deal." She hesitated. "They're really okay?"

I smiled. "More than okay. They're pretty much perfect."

"Good. I'm really sorry you missed out on talking to your mom tonight. I know how much that meant to you."

"The Goddess knows best, child. I was meant to be here tonight." And now, at least, I had a feeling I knew why that was. "Now get to bed. I don't want to hear bad things from your teacher tomorrow, you hear?"

She laughed. "You know I'm the teacher's pet. She only has good things to say about me."

She wasn't wrong. "Tell Ruby I'll be home in a couple of hours. I want to see Kimberly situated in her new room before I leave."

We ended the call, and I turned to find my sister, Sapphire, standing behind me with her new husband Archie Mineheart. She was holding a large thermos.

"The sheriff gave us the good news. I brought something along to celebrate the event." She lifted the thermos.

I was guessing coffee, though why that would be a celebratory drink I didn't know. But when the aroma hit me when she poured me a cup, my eyes teared up again.

It was Mom's special eggnog, warmed to just that perfect temperature. I hadn't tasted it in all these years since her passing. And I'd especially missed it every holiday.

In fact, I'd craved it. With a passion.

I swallowed and sank down onto one of the waiting room couches. The perfect ending to a busy night. Or so I thought. The sheriff proved

me wrong.

"I know you didn't get your seance," he said. "And I'm sorry about that. But I do have a consolation prize for you."

I opened one eye and looked at him. "You do?"

He nodded, glancing up at the others too. "Yup. I just checked my email. Hadn't had a chance all day what with the craziness Halloween always brings to Wind's Crossing."

Then he went silent. It was one of his more annoying traits. He would make me beg for it. Normally that would take some time. Not tonight.

"Please enlighten us with your grand news."

He grinned at me. "Well, since you insist. The court just signed their approval on your petition for guardianship. You are now officially Nancy Jefferson's sole guardian."

Oh, praise the Goddess.

"Of course, there is some bad news to go along with that."

Wasn't there always? But this time I just looked at him. No way was I going to ask to be told bad news.

"No more funding for being a foster parent. You're off the county's purse strings."

I'd have hit him if he'd been closer. Good thing for me Sapphire was in range of him. She took care of that for me. The money had never been a selling point in becoming a foster parent for Nancy. Every cent of it was sitting in a college fund for her. The fund would still grow even now. This was only the first step in my plan. I wouldn't be fully satisfied until Nancy could call herself a Ravenswind. Legally.

But there was time for that.

"So, should we mark our calendars for a seance next All Hallows' Eve?" Archie asked.

I shook my head. "No need anymore." I took another long sip of the eggnog and sighed. Then I looked up at Sapphire. "Mind telling me why you never shared Mom's recipe with me?"

"Well, for starters, it isn't Mom's recipe. It's mine. Remember that summer when I was really into kitchen experimentations? This was one of my successes."

My brows drew together. "That can't be right. Mom said this was passed on to her from another generation."

Sapphire laughed. "Yes, she did. But she didn't say it was a generation from the past, now did she?"

I had to give her that one. Any other night, I might have been upset about having the secret recipe kept from me for so long. But not tonight.

"You are going to share now, right?"

"Of course." She reached into her bag, pulled out a recipe card,

and handed it to me. I placed it in my purse with care. No way was I losing it now.

Funny how Mom had found a way to answer my question without me even having to ask it. Good thing too.

Because I was really thinking that any seance trying to contact my mother's soul on the other side would be unsuccessful from this point forward.

I truly didn't think she was there any longer. In a way that scared the holy hell out of me. Not that she was back in the world. That was more than fine by me. If anyone deserved a second go-around in life, it was Mom.

It scared me for what that meant for the future.

Sapphire and I are powerful witches. Ruby and Amie are too. Well, Amie especially now. But Mom? That woman had true power. I'd even pit her against a Light Witch if it came to it. Which it wouldn't. Not in our family anyway.

But if the Goddess had seen fit to bring back my mother's soul, then the fight ahead must be a scary one indeed.

I took another sip of my eggnog. Absolutely perfect. It was just enough to dull the worry.

Whatever the future held, we'd face it together as a family. And somehow, someway, the Ravenswinds would make it. The Minehearts would make it too. After all, like it or not, they were family now.

Smiling at Sapphire, I stood up. "Come on. There's someone I want you to meet."

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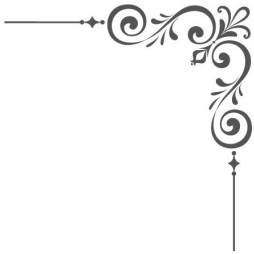

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Witch of a Godmother

Witch Reborn 1

By Belinda White

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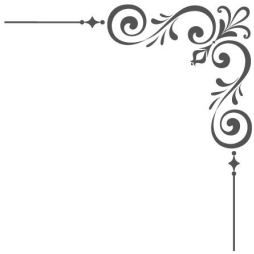

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WITCH OF A GODMOTHER

Introduction

MY NAME IS OPAL RAVENSWIND, and I'm a witch.

But not just any witch. Goddess, no. I'm the High Priestess of the Gemstone Coven and a personal favorite of the Goddess herself. Well, all my family are Her favorites, actually. Not that She would ever admit that to anyone. Goddesses aren't supposed to have favorites, you know.

My niece, Amethyst, even came up with a name for us. "Team Destiny."

Personally, I'm not sure how I feel about our team being named after Amie's familiar. But then, I have to concede that her feline familiar is far different from most. Goddess touched that one. So, I guess if the Goddess doesn't have a problem with the name, neither do I.

I'd make more of a sticking point of it, but the team includes members outside the Gemstone Coven, so I'm trying to be flexible here.

My daughter (Ruby) and Amie have left the family farmhouse and moved into a place of their own. Before you start to think I might be getting lonely here all by myself, well, you can think again.

I've moved in a whole other family to take their place. There's my ten-year-old newly adopted daughter, Nancy, and most recently her older friend, Kimberly and her brood. A son of five years old, and a three-month-old baby girl.

Oh yeah, about that baby... she has my mother's soul.

How do I know this? Well, it was kind of a had to be there moment. That first instant after baby Pearl's birth, I recognized her for who she was. For just a brief moment, my mother and I shared a long gaze into each other's eyes. A soul gaze that left no doubt in my mind.

Then the eyes had changed. I'm not sure how reincarnation works, but it would make sense that the new life form wouldn't exactly remember their previous time on earth. Who knew how many times we had traveled this place before in different bodies? Only the Goddess knew that, and She wasn't telling.

The problem was that even if the baby didn't know who she was, she still was. In other words, the powerful soul in her still remembered that it had magic. I had a funny feeling that things would get mighty interesting in the old farmhouse as baby Pearl got older.

One of these days, I'd have to find a way to let Kimberly in on the secret. But that day isn't today.

Well, that's pretty much my life right now. We are all getting settled into our new lives and lifestyles, and things are going pretty well.

At least they were until I went to that Fontaine estate auction. I kind of wished I'd skipped that one...

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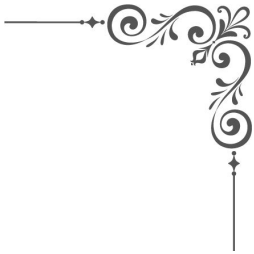

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Chapter 1

"I didn't do it, Opal. I swear it."

Kimberly seemed more than a little distraught. Her eyes were wide, and she looked close to tears.

"Well, if you swear you didn't do it, then I believe you."

"You do?"

Granted, she'd only been working in the shop for a few months now, and a few of those weeks had been in extreme part-time mode while she recovered from childbirth. Not something I could fault her for, as I'd known the situation going in. In fact, that was part of the reason I'd hired her.

"I do. But if you would be so kind, I'd be interested in knowing what it is I believe that you didn't do."

She swallowed and nodded. She still didn't look too sure about it. I was really hoping she'd come out of her fear of me soon. It was getting cumbersome. And, in a way, we were family now. Even if she didn't really know that yet.

It was complicated.

"You told me yesterday that you'd decided to keep the desk from the Fontaine estate, and you asked me to move it into the back room."

I nodded, as non-threateningly as I possibly could. "That's right. I did."

"Well, Nancy helped me, and we put it right where you said you wanted it. I swear it was fine after the move. I checked."

I tilted my head, wishing she'd get on with it already. "And I take it now it isn't fine?"

Kimberly shook her head, and yes, a single tear leaked out. "No. The middle desk drawer on the right-hand side is broken. It looks like someone tried to break into it. But no one's been back there this morning. At least, not that went past me."

And no one had gone past me either. Which only left one alternative. An alternative I didn't much care for.

My anger must have shown, and the tears started in earnest. I'd be ever so glad when this learning about my moods phase was over. It wasn't her I was angry at. I hadn't lied when I said I believed her.

"There's no call to cry, child. I know you didn't do it. I sat at that desk to do the books last night after you left with the children to go

home. That drawer wasn't broken then." I gave her a slight smile. "I'd swear to that myself."

She looked confused. "Then how..." her voice trailed off as her eyes widened. "You think someone broke in?"

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I wish I could say otherwise, but I can't. It's the only explanation I can think of. I'd better call the sheriff."

She nodded, then hesitated. "You would really have believed me, even if you hadn't seen the drawer?"

"Of course, I would have. You're not a liar, Kimberly. If you were, you wouldn't be working for me, now would you?"

It seemed pretty simple to me.

The baby let out a whimper in the backroom, and Kimberly went to check on her. Once she'd left the room, I dialed Orville Taylor. Orville was the sheriff of Wind's Crossing and the surrounding county.

He was also my man. Only no one but the two of us knew that last part. He was more than willing to share our status with the world, but I wasn't so sure about it. I didn't want the fact that he was courting a known witch to hamper his chances come reelection time. There were still a fair few townsfolk who didn't approve of the pagan lifestyle.

Pagan. You have to love that word. Or not. People tended to use it to describe anyone who didn't believe the same way they did.

So be it. I'm a pagan. And darn proud of it too. I would never deny my Goddess just to gain popularity here on earth. Wouldn't be anywhere near worth it in the long run. But don't think that means I'm against God and all the Christians out there. From my standpoint, we share a lot of the same viewpoints. Kindred spirits in my eyes.

"Hey, Opal, what's up? You're still coming to my place for dinner tonight, right? My famous pinto beans are stewing up right nice in my crockpot. Should be an enjoyable dinner by all accounts."

I smiled. Orville had taken to fixing dinner for me every Tuesday night. It was kind of nice to have an evening out every week. I loved Kimberly and the kids, but Orville's place was just so... well, quiet. A person needs that every now and again.

"Counting on it. And I'll even bring the cornbread. The sweet kind, of course." I paused. "Unfortunately, that isn't why I'm calling. It's the sheriff I'm needing right at the moment."

His voice sobered instantly. "What's happened. Is everyone okay?"

"Relax. Everyone's fine. But that desk I got from the Fontaine estate has seen better days."

"What happened?"

"Well, it looks like the shop had a visitor after I locked up last night. I wouldn't have noticed it at all if they hadn't broken the drawer on the desk."

“Crap. I’ll be there in a couple minutes.” He hesitated. “Wait a minute. You got coffee?”

“Nope, haven’t made my morning run yet.”

“In that case, make it ten minutes. Maybe more if there’s a line at the Flour Pot. Kimberly still drinking Chai tea?”

“Yes. And you know I wouldn’t complain if a Raspberry Delight found its way here too.”

He chuckled. “Like I’d come from the Flour Pot without a few of those.”

The call disconnected, and I glanced out the front shop window. There weren’t any customers waiting to get inside, so I decided to leave the sign on closed until we got things squared away.

I parted the curtain into the back and made my way over to the desk. Kimberly was changing the baby at the dressing table. She glanced over.

“It looks bad, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it certainly doesn’t look good,” I said, running my hand over the surface of the drawer. My fingers didn’t make it too far, though, before I thought of myself and stopped. I doubted if the sheriff would go to the trouble of taking fingerprints, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Now that Pearl is wide awake, I’m going to put her in the sling and wear her for a while. I can open the shop if you want... or would you rather wait until the sheriff has come and gone?”

“Why don’t we keep closed up for a bit yet. I’d like you to do a quick inventory of the front stock. I’ll take care of the stuff back here. It doesn’t look like anything but the desk was touched, but that just isn’t making any sense.”

She nodded, grabbed the inventory book from the file cabinet, and started off.

I didn’t really need an inventory book for the back room. One side of the room was now taken by my new to me desk and the baby’s crib and dressing table. The other side still held the spell lab where Ruby and I made our potions and brews. The walls of that side were covered with shelves filled with all the magical ingredients we might ever have need of. Some of those were quite pricey and hard to come by.

I have to admit; I was more than a little relieved when I found nothing missing from the stock. Curiouser and curiouser.

When Orville knocked on the back door, I was still standing there, staring at the desk. What secrets could an empty desk possibly hold?

“Come on in,” I called. Normally that door was locked at all times. Like I said, some of the items back here were far rarer than those up front. Plus, the baby spent a lot of time back here. We certainly weren’t going to take any chances of losing her.

To say she was a pretty little thing just didn't do her justice. Baby Pearl was beautiful beyond compare. And I really didn't think that was just my personal bias, either. Sometimes magic manifested in ways other than... well, magic.

The sweet smell of coffee, Chai tea, and raspberry-filled donuts filled the room as the door opened. Hmm. Smart of him to make me associate those smells with him. Hitting a whole other sense on that one.

Having the heart involved in a relationship was good, yes. But when you got all the other senses involved? It was even better. Love involved so much more than just a heart. And I loved everything about this man.

Too bad he was the sheriff, and I was a devout spinster. Destined to be the coven's crone by the look of it. Oh, who was I kidding, I was the coven's crone already. Not that I minded that title, as it denoted the wisest of the group. But it wasn't a title I had expected to be wearing well before I hit the fifty years on earth mark.

Orville nodded to me, then walked through the curtain to take Kimberly her tea and donut. When he came back, he took a quick look at the desk and whistled.

"You weren't kidding, were you? What were they trying to do, take the whole drawer?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "By the way, Kimberly said to tell you that nothing on the expensive side of things at least was taken from out front." He glanced around him. "How about back here?"

"Nope. Not a darn thing. Whoever it was, they seemed to have a single focus on that drawer."

He walked over to it and tried to open it. No luck. "Don't suppose you have the key?"

I grinned at him. "Well, at least that was one thing I did right. I put the desk key on my keyring when I decided to use it for the business books." I slid the right key to the front of my keyring and handed it to him. "Don't suppose you'll be taking fingerprints, then?"

An eyebrow arched. "Do you think it would do any good?"

Considering that, I shook my head. "No, not really. That only works if you have the person in the database already, right?" He nodded. "And that only becomes a factor if they were stupid enough not to wear gloves. Which I will bet isn't the case."

If they were smart enough to figure out how to break into my shop without leaving a sign of it by an apparent forced lock or broken glass, then I was betting they were a pro at this kind of thing.

Orville turned the key in the lock and when we heard the slight click, he pulled the drawer gently. It slid out perfectly.

“Well, at least they didn’t damage its functionality,” I said. That much at least was in my favor. Though I was figuring it wouldn’t be cheap getting that woodwork repaired. I might just have to live with a damaged drawer. Kind of ticked me off, honestly. That was my favorite piece from the entire estate.

He looked over his shoulder at me. “Will it hurt anything if I take out the whole drawer?”

“Go for it.”

The drawer slid out, and Orville immediately turned it upside down and then started knocking on it.

“Huh. You think maybe a hidden compartment?”

He shrugged. “You never know, do you? These old desks sometimes hold things like that.”

I looked at the desk with a whole new respect. I hadn’t heard of the maker of this one, but it looked like I had a bit of research to do. Usually, a creative desk maker will use the same kind of style for more than one desk. Unless, of course, it was a custom one-off job. With Fontaine’s money, that could well be the case.

I nodded to the drawer. “Anything?”

He frowned at it. “Not a darn thing, actually. Just an ordinary, very empty drawer.” His eyes met mine. “Was there anything in it when you bought it?”

“Nope. It was clean as a whistle.”

Orville pulled out the desk chair and sat down heavily, staring at the desk. “Well, this is a puzzler. Why on earth would anyone go to the risk of breaking into a shop to steal a single desk drawer that is totally empty?”

“You thinking something like a college prank? A fraternity test of some kind?”

Wind’s Crossing was definitely not a university town, but the next town over to the North was. Our small town was often the butt of their juvenile prank wars.

He rubbed his chin. “Maybe, but it just doesn’t feel right. Unless it’s one of your... more Goddess-loving clients, they wouldn’t even know the desk was back here. And you haven’t had it all that long, have you?”

“Three days total. But Kimberly just moved it into the back for me yesterday. They could have seen it out front before that. Wouldn’t take too much effort to look behind the curtain.”

“Well, right now then, that will have to be my working theory. It’s the only thing that makes any kind of sense at all. Not that those fraternity tests have any kind of sense to them.”

I took in a deep breath and blew it out. “So nothing to be done about it then. I’ll have to get a quote on getting it fixed. See if it’s

worth it." Then I looked him in the eye. "You don't think they'll be back, do you?"

More chin scrubbing. "I wouldn't think so, not if that theory holds out, anyway. It wouldn't make much sense to hit the same place twice. Word will get out that I've been here. Should put the fear of God into them if they have half a brain."

Walking over to the back door, I looked down at the lock, then opened the door and looked at the other side. Nothing. Not a single dadgum sign that someone had broken in.

"I think there might be a problem with the fraternity theory, Orville," I said after closing the door again. "I mean, it makes sense that they would break in from the back, right? The front of the shop is right on the street and pretty well lit all night long. But there isn't a mark on this door."

He chuckled, then glanced at the closed curtain before pulling me into a fierce hug. His hard lips met mine in a quick kiss, then he leaned his forehead onto the top of my head.

"I do so love it when you say something silly, Opal. Makes you seem more like one of us fallible humans."

I stood a little straighter. "Doesn't seem so silly to me, sheriff."

"Uh-oh. I've gone from Orville to sheriff." He grinned at me as he took a step back. "Better watch my step from here out or I'll be having cornbread-less soup beans tonight."

He walked over to the door, opened it, then locked it. "You can time me if you want." Then he stepped out the door and closed it behind him.

I heard the lock click into place. Ten seconds later, he was opening the door again with that crap-eating grin still in place. "Sorry it took so long, I had to dig out my credit card."

He held up the offending piece of plastic as proof. I was so not going to live this down. He'd been after me to update the locks on the shop for years.

"Now will you please consider getting deadbolts on both doors?"

I sighed, then nodded. When he was right, he was right. No sense in denying it anymore. Or relying on my reputation as a witch not to be messed with. Obviously, that status was slipping. Something I'd definitely have to work on.

"You buy the locks, and throw in lunch, and I'll come by around noon and install them for you."

He looked at the lonely little window I had in the back room, and I shook my head. "One thing at a time, Orville. Besides, I have a spell I can use for the window. Should work just fine."

That made him pause. "I'd be interested in hearing about that, but right now, I'd best get back to the office. Don't want the town saying I

give you witches preferential treatment or anything.”

He didn’t even glance at the curtain this time before leaning down to kiss me goodbye.

My lover sheriff was growing careless.

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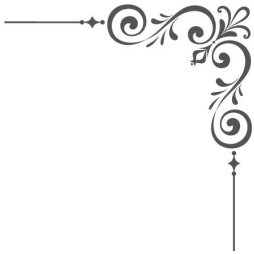

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Chapter 2

By the time all of us left the shop that night, the deadbolts were installed on both the front and back doors. I had looked up the spell for the windows, but when the shop turned off busy, I hadn't had time to gather the ingredients and cast it yet. There might only be one smaller window in the back, but there were a lot of them in the front. We needed them there for the lighting.

That could be a time-consuming task. Yes, I could have just concentrated on that one single backroom window, but I wasn't known for doing anything halfway. Better to wait until I could do a proper job of it.

Kimberly knew my standing dinner date with the sheriff was a thing, even if she—along with the rest of the town—just thought it was a dinner of friends rather than lovers. I walked into the farmhouse with her and the kids and watched as she got baby Pearl situated in her swing. It was always fun to watch, as the process usually involved more than a few giggles. Baby giggles were the best.

"You know if you and the kids need anything, I can be here in five minutes flat."

Kimberly smiled at me. "I know, Opal. You tell me that every week, and every week I don't call."

"Well, I just want you to remember it, and know that it still holds true. You are all family now." She followed me into the kitchen and stood back, watching me as I started on the cornbread. Nothing fancy tonight, just a simple box mix.

"You really mean that, don't you? About us all being a family now?"

I glanced back at her. She was leaning on the side of the kitchen doorway with her arms hugging herself. I put down the box in my hand and considered for a minute. I didn't want to scare her off, but I needed her to know just how much I meant it.

Finally, I did what my heart told me to do. I walked back to her and gathered her into the biggest hug I was capable of. After a second or two, she was hugging me back and crying.

We stood like that for quite a while. She needed to get it out of her system. I might be a few minutes late for my dinner date, but Orville would understand. I was staying where I was needed for as long as I

was needed.

Kimberly gave a last sniff and stepped back. “Thank you, Opal. It’s just… I’ve never really had…”

I let her go and then reached out to pat her shoulder. She didn’t have to say the words for me to understand. Kimberly, much like my precious little Nancy, came from a very messed up childhood.

“Well, you have one now. And this family will always have your back, no matter what. You understand that, right?”

She gave a weak smile and wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “I’m starting to, yeah. Thanks.”

I nodded and went back to my cornbread making. “You need help fixing dinner for you and the kids?”

“Nope, got it covered. It’s a hot dog and coney sauce night. Kind of our own tradition for when you have your… night out with the sheriff.”

I wasn’t much liking that brief pause she put in there. Maybe she wasn’t like the other townsfolk in thinking we were just friends after all. Just maybe I needed to watch myself in public a little more with the good sheriff. I’d never forgive myself if I cost him his job. He was the best dang sheriff Wind’s Crossing had ever had. We needed him in that position.

There was a loud bang from upstairs. Now that I’d had Ruby take off that blasted noise-canceling spell, we could hear things like that again. Came in handy when the older kidlings spent so much time up there.

Nancy’s voice came trailing down the stairs. “We’re okay.”

Yeah, we would be needing more than that assurance.

Kim smiled at me. “I’ve got this.” Then she walked over and gave me another brief hug before jogging up the stairs to check on the kids.

I looked back at baby Pearl, happily swinging and in the satisfied baby zone. Then I finished my cornbread and got ready for my evening out.

After the day I’d just had, I was needing it badly.

I ALWAYS ENTERED ORVILLE’S house through the back door. It wasn’t so much the secrecy thing, although that played a part in it. I’ve always believed that front doors were for strangers and salesmen. Back doors were for family and friends.

And, yes, lovers too, apparently.

He opened the door wide and pulled me into his arms. But not before I got a good look at him. My man might be older, like me, but dang was he ever a sight to make a woman swoon. Especially when he was wearing a big pink apron with actual ruffles.

Orville was full of surprises like that. I never knew what sight would greet me when I came to call. But it was always something new. I don't know how he did it.

His laughter joined mine as he stepped back and did a mini twirl. "Do you like it?"

"Like isn't exactly the word for it." Not all men could carry it off. Orville could. Even in a ruffled hot pink apron, he was one hundred percent man.

He grinned at me, then turned back to the counter and lifted the lid on the slow cooker. Using the lid as a fan, he wafted the sweet aroma over to me.

"I hope you're ready to eat, because I've been smelling this for the past hour, and I'm starving."

I lifted the bag in my hand. "Ready when you are. And the cornbread muffins are still warm too." Not that there would have been an issue even if they weren't. The beans were plenty hot enough to take care of that.

"Grab a couple of bowls down, and I'd ladle us up some eats."

Within minutes, we were digging in with gusto. The girls had never been much of ones for good old-fashioned soup beans and cornbread. I'd forgotten how much I loved them. They were definitely going back on the menu back home.

After the initial rush of hunger wore off, and we'd filled our bowls with seconds, Orville looked over at me. I could tell something was on his mind.

"Out with it already."

He took a deep breath. "Remember back when all the craziness started when Val Kimble was killed? Opie told me that he watched your girls put up a protection ward on the farmhouse. I was curious. Do you have anything like that set up at the shop?"

I chewed slowly and shook my head. "Nope. Wouldn't work. Those wards are meant to keep out—or at the very least alert you to—people who don't have your best interest at heart. That's all fine and dandy when you're talking about your home. Not so much when you're talking about a place of business."

"Everyone's out to make a deal, huh?"

"Most people, yes. And a fair few wouldn't mind taking advantage of a shop owner if it meant getting themselves a bargain. Hence the problem."

He nodded. "Okay, I get that. And I don't suppose there's a way to set it up to only be active during the after-dark hours? When the shop is closed?"

I stared at him. Well, of course now that he mentioned it, it seemed like a totally plausible thing to do. I was pretty sure there had

to be a way to do it. Of course, it might take a phone call or two to the Minehearts to figure it all out. Earth witches were just plain better with protection spells than we Air witches.

When I didn't say anything, he grinned at me. "Never even crossed your mind, did it?"

Pride is a horrid, horrid thing sometimes. With anyone else, I'd probably have denied it. Or, even more likely, simply ignored the question and given the asker a haughty look. But this was Orville, the one person other than my sister Sapphire, that truly knew me.

"It did not."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I didn't think so. How hard is it to do?"

"Truthfully, I don't know. I'd have to get some help with that."

An eyebrow arched upwards. "The great Opal Ravenswind not only admits she missed something, but also admits she needs help with a spell?" He shook his head. "You're slipping, my dear."

I gave the eyebrow right back at him. "And you're the only one that knows that, now aren't you?"

He swallowed. He knew my history for doing Karma spells. If word got out on the street to damage my infallible reputation, I'd know exactly who to blame. And I really put a lot of value on my reputation as a witch.

With good cause too. I was the Goddess' High Priestess, after all. At least, I was her High Priestess for the Gemstone Coven. To me, that was all that mattered.

He backtracked. Big time. "So, not something that can be done tonight then, right?"

I nodded.

Orville thought for a minute. The space of two whole bites. We were winding down on the eating. Personally, I was thinking I should have worn a skirt with an elastic waistband. It was getting a mite uncomfortable.

"Okay, so just in case whoever it was does come back tonight—maybe with better tools than a credit card—I have a couple of options for you to help protect your shop."

"I'm listening."

"Well, my favorite is option number two."

Up went my eyebrow again. "Then let's start with option number one, shall we?"

He took a deep breath. "Had a feeling you'd say that." He took one last bite of his soup beans and then pushed the bowl back and looked at me. "The shop is within easy walking distance from here. I can drive my squad car down and park it at the back of your shop. An empty sheriff's vehicle generally gives people up to no good enough worry to change their plans. Then I can walk back here."

Sounded like a decent enough plan to me. “And what’s option number two?”

He grinned at me. “You still have that mattress in the upstairs of the shop, right?”

I leaned back in the chair and thought about it. Orville knew if he asked me to spend the night here, I’d say no. Even though he asked every single time. Neighbors had a way of knowing when people spent the night. Even people who came in through the family and friends back door.

But with all that being said, the two of us had, on more occasion than one, taken full advantage of that upstairs mattress at the shop.

And, truthfully, right now, option number two sounded mighty good to me too. A gal had to burn off the extra calories somehow, right?

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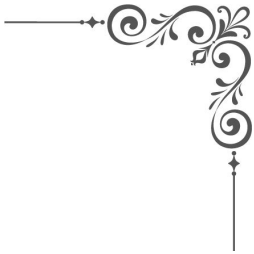

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Chapter 3

I didn't like the smile on Kimberly's face when she and the kids made it to the shop the next day. Yes, I'd called to tell her I was going to spend the night at the shop in case the would-be drawer thief came to try again. But I hadn't mentioned a thing about the sheriff staying with me.

Her smile told me that I really hadn't had to.

"So, here's the change of clothes you asked me to bring," she said, handing me a hanger with a neatly pressed dress on it. Then she sniffed the air. "Is the sheriff here?"

I frowned at her. "No, why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "Just smells a little like his aftershave. Must be left over from yesterday, huh?" Then she gave me that knowing smile again, got the baby settled into her daytime wearable harness, and went through to open the shop.

What could I do? Absolutely nothing. I trusted Kimberly not to go running her mouth off around town. After all, as I've said before, she's family now.

My first call of the morning was to my sister, Sapphire. It was a little easier to call her and ask for help than to call and ask the Minehearts directly. Even if, technically, she was one of them now. Come to think of it, I'd never thought to ask her if she'd changed her last name over. I certainly hoped not. But still, marriage brings one into the family, name or no name.

I still had trouble believing my own sister went and married an Earth witch. Even harder to believe was that my own daughter seemed to be following in her footsteps. Not that Arc was a bad young man. He just wasn't an Air witch. Sue me, but I wanted the best for my daughter.

I haven't given up hope on that front yet. They'd just recently moved in together. Things usually got very interesting in a relationship when that happened. There was still time for it all to fall apart.

"Hello, Opal. I do hope this fine morning finds you well."

"It does, sister. Now can we cut through the formal friendly banter and get down to brass tacks?"

She laughed. "Of course. I take it you need something?"

“Unfortunately, yes. Someone broke into my shop night before last, and I’m thinking about setting up a night time only protection ward.”

There was a brief silence from her end of the phone. “Ah, I see. So you really want to be talking to my husband then.”

I shivered. “No. I want to talk to my sister and have her talk to her husband for me.”

Another laugh. I was glad one of us was enjoying this. Wish it was me.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist. What kind of ward are you thinking about?”

“Nothing quite as full-blown as the Mineheart Fireworks spell.” I thought about it. Something that I probably should have done before dialing her. “Maybe something like our protection bracelets? That tells us when one of the family is in danger? Would that be possible? Just add a gem to tell me if someone was in the shop?”

“Interesting idea, actually. But I have no reason to believe it wouldn’t work. Let me see if Lily is free this afternoon. If she is, the two of us can come over, and between all of us, we’ll figure something out.” She paused. “If that works with your schedule, that is. Ruby’s still off doing her own thing, isn’t she?”

I grimaced. That was a sore spot with me. It was one thing to move into another home, and another thing entirely to quit her job here at the shop. Kimberly was great at the front of the shop duties. But she wasn’t a witch.

She did me absolutely no good with the preparation of spells. I missed Ruby sorely when it came to that.

“Yes, she is. I’m afraid her days here at the shop are pretty much over, even if she hasn’t exactly come right out and told me that. Absence speaks louder than words sometimes. She seems to have left the old life pretty much behind her now.”

“That tends to happen, you know. When it was just you and her, she felt obligated to be there. Now, not so much.”

“Exactly. But Kimberly is working like a charm. The customers love her, and she takes care of the baby and the front shop all at the same time. She’s quite the worker.” If truth be told, she was twice the worker Ruby ever was. Maybe more. But then again, she might just be trying really hard to prove herself to me. I didn’t think that was all of it though. She really was a gem. One that I was extremely pleased Nancy had brought into our lives.

For more reasons than just as a shop worker too. Baby Pearl was special in her own right. Very special.

“So, you’d be free?” Sapphire asked, getting me back on track.

“Anytime you are.” I hesitated. “But is Lily the right one to help? As much as it pains me to ask this, don’t you think we might need an

Earth witch?"

She laughed. "I keep forgetting that you don't know Lily as well as I do. For a hedgewitch, she's very... well, scary. Proficient, too, but more scary. Trust me when I say you do not want to get on her bad side. She can make your Karma spells look like blessings."

I straightened. Lily might be good, but I highly doubted that she was that good. Still, not worth arguing about. Especially as it looked like I'd be needing her help either way.

"Sorry, dear," Sapphire said. "I shouldn't have said that. I don't mean to cast dispersion on your Karma spells. And I really don't want a battle between the two of you as to who is the scariest witch of all. The world isn't ready for that. May never be."

My feathers were still a tad bit ruffled, but so be it. I needed the help.

I RAN THE OLDER KIDS to school, then stopped off for our coffee and Chai tea on the way back. Minus the Raspberry Delights, though that was very hard for me to leave out. But my dress seemed to be a little tighter than I remembered it being, so I could do without the added sugary calories for one day.

Instead, I popped by the market for some fruit and yogurt. Yum. Well, not really yum, but edible anyway. Then I poured myself into catching up paperwork and all the accounting type stuff that goes with it.

We closed the shop for a short half-hour around noon to go out and grab a bite to eat. That wasn't an everyday occurrence, but it happened regularly enough to not throw our customers into too bad of a frenzy. They'd see by the sign in the window that we'd be back shortly.

There were days when you just didn't want to have food delivered. Most days we brought our lunches from home. That had been far too much to ask of Kimberly, seeing as how she'd had to get three kids ready and out the door by herself this morning.

So lunch was on me.

We'd barely turned the corner on our way back when Lily's van pulled up at the curb in front of the shop.

After a few minutes of making over baby Pearl, and a quick switchover of the wearable baby harness to Sapphire who insisted on more baby time, we made our way into the back room.

Lily's eyes hadn't stopped moving since she entered my shop, but I noticed they widened considerably when we stepped into the back. They weren't on the door, or the lonely little window, or even the damaged desk. They were centered on my shelves upon shelves of

magical ingredients.

She hesitated, then looked toward me with an arched eyebrow. “May I?” She motioned to the shelves.

I nodded. If my sister vouched for this hedgewitch, then that was good enough for me. Plus, of course, after today with no bad luck, I’d know the instant anyone entered the shop in my absence. That helped too.

If I’d thought her eyes were wide at the sight of the shelves filled with ingredients, potions, and brews, then I was amazed at their width once she got her eyes on some of the labels.

She swallowed and walked back over to us. “That’s quite a fine selection you have there. And I understand you sell them to the witch public?”

“I do. But I should warn you, some of them don’t come cheap. At all.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t expect them to.” She paused, glancing back at one particular bottle. “Might one ask where you got your hands on actual dragon scale powder? I’d honestly thought it was a myth, but then I’ve run into a spell or two that require it. None of the ingredients I’ve tried substituting even come close to what the end result should be.”

“They wouldn’t. And that’s one of the rarest things I’ve managed to find.” I shivered and hugged myself at the thought of the thief taking that small little bottle instead of trying to go for a drawer of an old desk. Perhaps I’d better think twice about leaving that little item here. Home might be a much safer place for it. After all, the wards there were quite substantial and at work twenty-four hours a day. Not a bad thing for an item so rare that getting a replacement was the next best thing to impossible.

“But you did find it. Actual dragon scale powder? How? And more importantly where?”

Shaking my head, I gave her what I hoped was a sad smile. “Unfortunately, I’m not at liberty to disclose that. My contact requires extreme secrecy. If I tell one witch their name or how to find them, they’ll never sell to me again. Believe me when I say I simply can’t risk that happening.”

Lily nodded slowly. “Understood. I suppose if one had access to a living legend such as a dragon, one wouldn’t want that getting out, now would one?”

“One would not.”

“So, ladies,” Sapphire said, obviously ready to change the subject and get to work. “Where do we start?”

It was nice of Sis to include me in the ladies, but we all knew who she was really talking to. This was Lily’s show. Sapphire and I were just there to do whatever she told us to do and provide any magical

juice that she might need.

In the end, it wasn't all that difficult. One might say that Lily made it look rather easy. Not that I could have done it on my own. Goddess forbid. But the three of us made a rather efficient trinity. And, in case you are wondering, trinities are very powerful things in the world of witches. Especially when two of them happen to have the last name of Ravenswind. And yes, I asked. Sapphire had kept her name.

That made me feel a bit better about the whole thing. Not by much, but every little bit helped. And even though I don't want to, I'd admit that the Earth witches had been rather helpful to have on our side of things these last few months.

By mid-afternoon, the spells were finished, carried out, and even tested. We were a go. The central on and off basic item was an ornate pendant we took from the front shop. I'd had my eye on it for a while now, anyway. Kind of glad no one had bought it. I'd have been kicking myself if they had. But in this business, one can't keep everything one falls in love with. If one did, they would end up with an attic space like my sister's. Not a good thing.

Downright fire hazard if you asked me.

The spell mechanism was a simple one. Once we closed up for the night, I would turn the pendant's stone toward my skin and tuck it under my shirt. I was afraid if it just lit up, I might miss it in the middle of the night while I was sleeping. This way, I'd feel it instead.

If anyone entered the shop, no matter how they did so, the pendant would start warming. And keep warming until I acknowledged it. At that point, it would be up to me to call Orville to get his heiny over to my shop and jump in my car and drive like a bat out of heck to get there too.

I wanted pretty badly to know who started all of this.

The spell tested out great, and I felt confident that it would all work out. If whoever had tried to steal that drawer came back, we'd have them.

Unfortunately, I let that confidence keep me from doing what I should have done with two extra witches there and willing and ready to help out. I should have gone one step farther and cast the unbreakable spell on the glass in the window.

Yeah. That might come back to bite me in the heiny.

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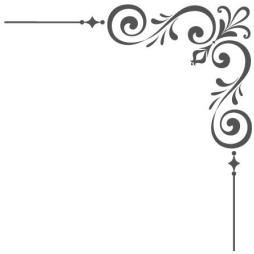

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Chapter 4

I know that I'm allowed to have personal time for myself. Everyone is. But that didn't stop me from feeling guilty about it when I actually took it.

So, to make things up a bit to Kimberly, I took control of the kids for the evening. I gave them choices. We could bundle up and go for a walk in the woods, or we could turn up the heat a touch and stay in for a board game night.

It was a tough decision, but the board games won out. We sent Kimberly upstairs for a nice long bubble bath and some much needed quiet time to herself and settled in to play the dinosaur version of Chutes and Ladders. Who knew they even had such a thing?

Nancy, that's who. Well, thanks to her new tablet that had access to the internet and online shopping. Thanks to her, we now had a fairly decent game cabinet. Last Christmas had helped that along nicely.

We all sat around the table and played. Baby Pearl got a little extra time in her swing, so she wasn't complaining either. For a game I'd never played before, it was rather fun. The dinosaurs were a nice little addition too. Mason knew all the dinosaurs' names and taught me fun little dinosaur facts as we played.

Well, fun for him. So who was I to complain about that? Nancy and I shared a few grown-up looks, but he didn't seem to notice. It kind of left me wishing that Nancy was a little more childlike herself. Although, by the time we made it to the end of the game, that hidden part of her was showing through a bit. We'd definitely be doing this more often.

Having a good childhood might have come a little late for her, but we could for sure try to make up for a little lost time. Weekly game nights might be a good start to that.

Once that game was over, we opted for a rousing game of Hungry Hungry Hippos, in which the kids beat me soundly. I'd like to say that's because I let them win, but who am I kidding? I couldn't have beat them in a week of Sundays. They were fierce.

They tried for more games, but I pulled the plug. The games had gotten a bit too lively there at the end, and we needed a good way to relax and calm down a bit before bedtime.

I sent them in to pick out a good movie while I heated a bottle and got Pearl ready for bed. I should have known it would be Frozen... again. Nancy loved the love story and Mason? Well, Mason adored Olaf and the reindeer with attitude. For the life of me, I could never remember his name. But then I tended to zone out when watching movies. Even the good ones that I hadn't seen a half dozen times already.

About halfway through, Kimberly came down the stairs and took baby Pearl from my arms. She was zonked out, but I'd been enjoying the feel of a baby in my arms again. We might have a rather weird relationship, Pearl and I, but in the end, she was a baby. Regardless of the age of the soul inside her.

Who knew how old any of our souls were? They could well be timeless entities, spending lifetime after lifetime here on earth. Or, then again, just perhaps the Goddess had pulled a few strings to get my mother back into a body again.

Either way, we'd probably never know. That was okay. Life should have some mystery to it. Death, too, for that matter.

The movie ended, and for once the kids didn't beg for another half hour of up time. I walked them upstairs and saw them into their pajamas and through their nightly teeth brushing and hygiene routine. Then I tucked them into their respective beds and came back downstairs.

Energy is so wasted on the young. Or perhaps they get their abundant energy by siphoning it off of us adults. Spending one full evening in the company of three youngsters shouldn't have tuckered me out as much as it had. I was getting out of shape. Maybe I should take Orville up on that gym membership. Wouldn't do to start losing my edge now.

I already had people breaking into my shop. If they started seeing weakness in me, what might come next? I didn't really want to know the answer to that one.

People, in general, had the worst natures of all the Goddess' creatures.

"Who's a pretty girl?" Bridget asked the instant my foot crossed the threshold into my personal space. I crossed over to her and scratched the offered chin. Obviously, that wasn't enough, because she repeated herself. "Who's a pretty girl?"

Bridget was my macaw parrot and my familiar. In my books, having a familiar that could talk just made sense. Beats a furball of a feline any day of the week, if you ask me.

I gave her a tired smile because I knew the routine as well as she did. "You are, Bridget."

"Damn straight." Then her little head tilted at that odd angle that

only birds seemed able to manage, her tiny beady eyes seeking out mine. “Pretty girl wants a treat.”

“Does she now?”

The feathered head bobbed up and down, and she stepped from foot to foot in a little dance. How does one say no to that?

I pulled open the drawer and got out a small cracker. Then I held it out in front of her. “What’s the magic word?”

“Abracadabra.”

I shook my head. “The other magic word.”

“Please and thank you.”

My eyebrow rose of its own accord. The thank you was new. A pleasant little surprise to end the evening on.

I changed into my nightgown and climbed into bed. Within seconds, the dream started.

I TRULY LOVE MY MEDITATION space. My own personal sanctuary. Everyone’s sanctuary is special and unique to them and them alone. Mine was no different.

Usually, when my mind relaxed at the end of the day enough to drop off to sleep, that’s where I would find myself. In my sanctuary. It happened regularly enough that I even installed a beautiful day bed to rest on. Sometimes it was just a matter of opening my eyes in my dream, seeing where I was, and then closing them again to blissful rest.

Apparently, that would not be the case tonight. When I opened my eyes, I wasn’t in my sanctuary at all. I was in the Goddess’ tree home.

There had been a time when I would have given just about anything for a personal meeting with my Goddess. Now, I found that whenever she graced me with her presence, it generally meant unpleasant news.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, relax, Opal.” She smiled at me, and my body warmed instantly. She could do that to a person.

“This isn’t a bad news visit? You don’t have some dire warning for me or my family?”

She laughed, and all was right with the world again. At least for a very brief space of time. “No dire warning, just a chat with one of my very favorite high priestesses.”

I looked at her. “But not your very favorite, huh?”

“Even if you were that, too, Opal, you know I couldn’t admit it. A Goddess can’t have favorites among her people. It wouldn’t be right. You do know that, right?”

I nodded. I was pretty sure I knew exactly where my family and I stood with the Goddess, and I was happy with that.

“So, what are we chatting about tonight?”

She glanced down at her hands, which were folded neatly in her lap. Now that I noticed, I realized that I was sitting across from her in one of her far too comfortable to be real chairs.

“I was rather wondering how Pearl was doing?”

Ah, so that was it. I had been wondering when we’d be having this conversation. “I find it interesting that you didn’t ask how the baby was doing, or even how baby Pearl was doing. But then, there’s a reason for that, isn’t there?”

Her eyes met mine. “You know there is.” The Goddess hesitated. “I’m not allowed to say much, and I really have to watch myself right now. But you know that Pearl is... special. I was there in that delivery room too. I saw your look when Pearl smiled at you.”

I nodded. “Kind of hard to miss the smile of your mother, isn’t it?”

The Goddess actually looked over her shoulder. Were we being watched or something? Were things really that bad, that even the Goddess had fears? But then I kind of knew the answer to that. We’d dealt with one issue just recently. Looked like there was still trouble on the Goddess front.

As my niece, Amie would say, Crapsnackles, that wasn’t good at all.

“I suppose it would be,” she said ever so softly. “Should that be the case, of course. The universe does sometimes reuse souls. The really good ones, anyway.” Then she shivered. “And sometimes, the really bad ones too. It’s a balancing act that we aren’t supposed to interfere in.”

She’d warned us of that kind of thing before. It’s why she depended on her followers to do the right thing. As it turned out, her hands were tied as to just how much help she could give us on the earthly plane without opening doors for the other, not so nice, deities to help their followers in the same manner.

That could be bad. Better to ignore this part of the conversation and get things back on track.

“Baby Pearl is doing very well. Thank you for asking. She recently started sleeping almost all night long. We’ve got her down to a single midnight bottle. That’s a lifesaver, that is.”

She grinned at me. “Yes, hearing a baby cry every two hours isn’t very conducive to a restful night’s sleep.” The grin faded. “I’m actually quite grateful that you invited Kimberly and her children in to live with you. She needs family right now.”

“Raising a baby is hard. I truly think the only way Sapphire and I made it through was because we double-teamed it. Without her by my side, it would have been a lot rougher. Even if having her there added another baby to the mix.”

The Goddess nodded. “There is a reason they say it takes a village to raise a child. It’s far too much to ask one person to do it alone.”

I agreed one hundred percent with that. “Well, she isn’t alone. Not anymore. And not ever again, if I have my say in it.” And it wasn’t just because of Baby Pearl, either. I’d grown to love her mother too.

“Yes, but I wanted you to know that I’m grateful all the same. All of you need to stay close now.”

My eyes widened. “Should the girls move back home?”

She laughed, but there really wasn’t much mirth in it this time. “Things aren’t quite that dire yet, but you do need to stay in touch. A weekly call-in at the very least. And keep an eye on those bracelets.”

“Weekly call-ins make sense for Sapphire and Amie, but I’ll be seeing Ruby on a more regular basis than that, won’t I?”

When she didn’t meet my eyes, I finally faced the truth of things. It was as I had feared this past couple of months. Ruby had no intention of coming back to work at the shop. But she was probably too afraid of hurting me to tell me that. Not telling me hurt more.

“I see.”

“Please don’t blame her. I know that you don’t realize this, but your mother went through the same thing when you and Sapphire moved into the farmhouse. There was a time when she felt you had abandoned her. That’s why I said you need to stay close. If they don’t call you or come visit, remember back to your days of youth. Call and visit them instead. Roads work both ways, Opal. Don’t let pride keep you apart.”

“Mom really felt that way?” My heart felt heavy. It’s hard to learn things like that when it was far too late to rectify them.

She reached over and patted my hand. “She also understood that the two of you had to make your own way in the world. Your own mark. She got that. But now it’s your turn to understand.”

I swallowed. If one really swallows in dreams. It felt like I did, anyway.

But the pain in my heart didn’t go away. It felt a little like it was trying to burn through my skin. Then I realized the heat wasn’t coming from the inside of me. It was coming from the pendant.

Someone was in the shop.

The Goddess reached out and touched my forehead, and I woke up already reaching for my phone.

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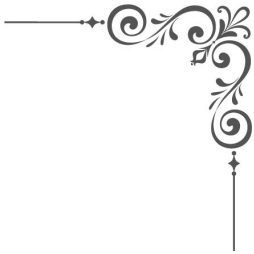

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Chapter 5

Time was of the essence. I wanted to face my shop's burglar one on one. Well, one on two, as my first call had been to Orville. No sense giving the perp time to get away.

I didn't even bother getting dressed. My coat went on directly over my nightgown, and I was in the car and headed into town.

The sheriff's vehicle was already at the back of the shop and the back door was standing wide open. I rushed in, looking around quickly. Nothing and no one but Orville.

"Don't tell me they got away."

He took a deep breath. "I'm afraid it looks that way. I've done a light search and don't see anyone in here, but I've got a couple of men on the way to do a more thorough job of it."

Even as he spoke the words, the men came through the door. Orville put one of them to searching the upstairs and the other at the back door in case the perp was still in here and got past the rest of us.

We took the downstairs.

He glanced over at me. "It's plenty warm in here if you want to take off your coat first."

I just looked at him. That would not happen anytime soon.

After a few seconds, blood started creeping into his cheeks. "You aren't naked under that coat, are you?"

Luckily, he had the presence of mind to lower his voice before asking. We really didn't want the deputies to hear that.

I tilted my head, my eyes never leaving his. "Would it be so bad if I was?" After all, I am a witch. He knows that I'm in no way ashamed of the body my Goddess gave me.

He glanced behind him at the officer standing by the back door. "Not if we were alone, no." He paused. "Maybe you'd better just keep that coat right where it is."

"That was my plan," I said, nodding. I wasn't about to tell him that I wasn't naked under the heavy winter coat. The reality was far worse, in my eyes.

Let's just say that my nightgown was a tad bit old fashioned. Not the kind one wears to entice the man one cares about. It would be a chilly day in you know where before I willingly let Orville see me in it.

I didn't want Orville to start looking at me like I was an old lady, and my current getup could start that process. I wanted him to keep on looking at me like I was... well, not old anyway.

We'd been moving during our short conversation. Through the curtain and out into the main shop. Our main goal at this point was to be sure the burglar wasn't still inside. After ten minutes of active searching, that possibility was quickly ruled out.

Whoever it was, they hadn't stuck around.

"Did that ward of yours make some kind of noise to warn them off?"

"No. I wanted to catch the dirty little devil red-handed."

He nodded and looked around us. "Didn't work all that well, did it?"

"It did not."

We ducked back through the curtain into the back room. The other deputies were standing by the back door.

"Do we have any idea what they were after?" One of them asked.

I glanced over at my wall of shelves, but there were no gaping holes to indicate missing jars or vials. It was Orville who saw it first.

"The drawer is gone."

My eyes snapped over to my desk. Crap. He was right. The whole stinking drawer was missing.

He hunched down in front of the desk and gave it a look over. "They didn't seem to damage the rest of the desk more than a few scratches. Should be repairable if you can get a woodworker to make a drawer replacement for you."

I was thinking it simply wasn't worth it. It's not like the desk was some priceless antique or anything. I'd just liked the look of it. Of course, that was when it had all its drawers.

"I'm thinking maybe we were wrong, sheriff. I'm thinking this has to be more than some college prank."

He nodded slowly. "I'm thinking the same thing."

"What was in the drawer? Why didn't they just take that and leave the drawer?"

I jumped at the voice directly over my shoulder. Orville's men were good. They were so quiet, at the moment, I'd forgotten they were even there.

"Because the drawer was empty," Orville told him. "There was a break in here two nights ago too. Then they just damaged the drawer, but must not have been able to get it out of the desk. This time they did."

"Probably Googled how to do that."

Orville nodded. "Probably." Then he looked over at me. "That's a computer term. Means they went online for information."

He rarely got the Ravenswind stare, but he did now. Not that it phased him. My man was pretty much unflappable.

After a minute with his men, while I stood staring at the offending hole in my new desk, he sent them back to their regular rounds and came to stand beside me.

"Don't suppose you've come up with an alternative theory as to what this is all about?"

I blew out a long breath and shook my head. "Not a dadgum clue. You?"

"I got nothing. I mean, we checked that drawer. There was nothing in it, and nothing special about it at all. So why go to the risk of breaking into a shop not once, but twice just to take that middle left-hand drawer? Makes absolutely no sense at all."

I was with him on that one.

Not one lick of sense at all.

SOMETHING THE SHERIFF said was bothering me, but I just couldn't put my finger on it.

Then again, maybe I'd think of it in the morning when my brain had finally gotten a few hours of non-Goddess-interrupted sleep. But that brought up a point.

Staring at the broken door, I realized there was no good way to lock up and go home. And I really didn't want to spend a second night here at the shop. Yes, I was quite sure that Orville would offer to keep me company. In fact, he would likely insist on it for security purposes. And I was doubtful that I could keep my coat on all night long.

Darn granny nightgown, anyway.

It took me a minute to realize that while I was staring at the broken door, Orville was staring at me.

"You look beat."

I nodded. "Feel beat too."

He walked over and set the door back into place, but of course, it wouldn't stay latched. Looking around, his eyes lit on the desk. "Why don't we scoot that desk over here and brace the door closed with it?"

Sounded like a plan to me. Within a few minutes, we were standing looking over our makeshift door barrier. It should hold pretty darn good. But then it hit me that all they really had to do was break the window, and they'd be in again.

"I'm thinking that maybe this time they got what they came for. How about you?"

I shrugged. "I really can't see why they came for an empty drawer, but it seems to be what they wanted. You think we'd be safe to go out the front and leave fixing the door for tomorrow?"

"I'm thinking so. And I can have my men do periodic drives around the shop tonight too, just in case." He hesitated. "But if there is anything in here worth a lot of money, you might want to take it home with you."

My eyes went to the tiny bottle of dragon scale. Yeah, that was going in my purse for sure.

Holding it up for him to see, I said. "This is pretty much irreplaceable. The rest is insured. Let's go home."

He held the front door open for me, then looked down at me. "Are you really naked under that coat?"

I grinned at him. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Then I got in my car and drove back to the farmhouse. I was really hoping that the amulet charm stayed cool for the rest of the night. Morning, too, for that matter, since technically that was what it almost was now.

The little hanging pendulum clock in my front room was just starting to strike twelve when I walked in the front door. Time for baby Pearl's midnight bottle. I warmed up a bottle from the fridge and then walked upstairs to collect Pearl. Sure enough, her eyes were wide open and watching the door.

If I'd waited a few more minutes, the baby screeching would have woken the entire house. Timing is everything. I changed her diaper and then sat in the rocking chair we'd placed by her crib to make the midnight feedings a little easier.

Pearl was halfway through the bottle when Kimberly came stumbling in from her bedroom. She looked at me in surprise.

"Did she cry out? I'm so sorry if I slept through it."

"You didn't. I just got back from the shop. We had another break-in. They got the drawer out this time but didn't seem to take anything else. They broke down the back door, though."

She rubbed her eyes. "Is the shop okay to just leave open?" She yawned. "Should I go and stay there tonight?"

"We got the back door secured enough for the night. I think, anyway." I smiled at her. "And I've got this. Go back to bed. Me and baby Pearl are just fine."

Kimberly yawned again. "Well, if you're sure. Thanks." Then she walked back into her bedroom and half closed the door. She always left it partly open. Not that it mattered. That was her room. I wouldn't go into it without her permission any more than she'd go into my bedroom without mine.

We respected each other's privacy. That was important. Even in families.

Maybe especially in families.

I looked down at baby Pearl. The bottle was now almost empty,

and she was nodding off. Time to burp. I threw the cloth diaper we kept on the arm of the rocking chair over my shoulder and lifted her into prime burping position. It didn't take long.

Once I had her all swaddled back up, I laid her back in her crib. She was out like a light. If she followed her new routine, we wouldn't hear another peep out of her until time to get up for the day and get moving ourselves.

Nancy insisted on handling that feeding. She was really enjoying having a baby sister. Even if they weren't related by blood. As long as they were all living in the same house, she considered them to be sisters.

I had a feeling that wouldn't change even if Kimberly grew tired of the arrangement and moved out. But I was truly hoping that wouldn't happen. I liked having a full house.

As I laid down in my own bed, I made sure the amulet around my neck was turned so that the gem was resting on my chest.

Hopefully, it would stay nice and cool.

I needed some sleep.

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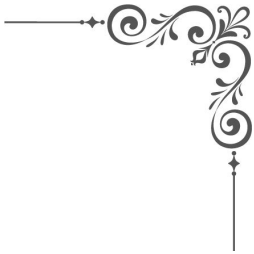

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Chapter 6

Everything ran smooth as clockwork the next morning. I got a few hours of uninterrupted sleep before the alarm went off. And just so you know, my alarm is Bridget. That bird hasn't missed a morning yet, getting me up on schedule.

She was very particular about getting a timely breakfast.

I filled her little food bowl, scratched her chin for a minute while I finished waking up, and then headed in for a quick shower. With so many people in the house, the showers had to be quick, or the hot water ran out. Luckily, Bridget went off before the other's alarms, so I always had the first run. No cold showers for me.

We ate a quick breakfast of cereal, milk, and orange juice, and then headed out. After dropping off Mason and Nancy at school, we headed to the shop.

I'll admit to a little anxiety before we got there. I'd definitely be putting that unbreakable spell on the glass today. And maybe an additional ward on the door that made noise to scare burglars off too.

But the worry was unfounded. Everything was exactly as Orville and I had left it the night before. The desk was still pushed firmly to the back door, and nothing looked like it had been touched. Best of all, all the windows were still intact.

Kimberly put baby Pearl in the small playpen we'd set up behind the counter for a little up and at 'em time. She was starting to get some good hand and eye coordination, not to mention strength. She'd be getting a lot more active now. So far, we hadn't broken down and bought an additional swing for the shop. We had a bouncer chair, which she seemed to like, a crib, and the little playpen. Right now, that was working well. Don't fix what isn't broke, right?

The playpen was all set up to keep her entertained too. Mason and Nancy weren't the only ones that had made out like little bandits at Christmas.

Before we switched the sign to the open side, Kimberly walked back with me to help manhandle the desk away from the back door. Then we leaned a simple wooden chair into place under the doorknob. It seemed to work just as well, and I got my desk back.

"I really don't know why anyone would want that middle right-hand drawer," she said, staring at the now gaping hole the drawer had

left behind.

I turned to her. “What did you just say?”

“I said I didn’t know why anyone would want that empty drawer.”

“No, you said middle right-hand drawer, didn’t you?”

She gave me a look, then glanced over to the desk and back at me. “Yes,” she said slowly. “That is the drawer they took. Is that important?”

I was staring at the desk, thinking. “It could be. The sheriff said the thief took the left-hand drawer. I’m thinking it’s all in how you look at it.”

“You think maybe they took the wrong drawer? But what difference does it really make? They’re all empty, right?”

“Yes, but the sheriff and I only checked that one drawer thoroughly.” Something I would rectify today.

“Oh, maybe there’s a false bottom or secret compartment? How cool.”

Yeah. So cool, it cost me a damaged desk and a broken back door. But I didn’t say that.

The little bell on the front door rang, and Kimberly gave a grimace. “Duty calls. Let me know if you find anything, okay?”

“You betcha.”

It annoyed me that people ignored the closed sign. Happened all the time, though. If the lights were on, they just assumed we’d forgotten to turn the sign. So they just walked on in. I couldn’t get too mad about it, though, because sometimes they were right.

I’d barely turned around before Kimberly’s head popped back through the curtain. “Um, Opal? There are some people here to see you.”

I opened my mouth to ask her who but thought it would save time to just go and see for myself. Striding out through the curtains into the main shop, I was rather surprised to see Maude Fontaine and Theodore Kramer, Attorney at Law, standing at my counter.

For what it’s worth, Maude was smiling. Showing a whole lot of perfectly white teeth too. Some people would see that as a bad sign. Predatory, even. And yes, I was one of them.

“You wanted to see me?” I asked, stepping up behind the counter.

Maude nodded. “Yes, we did.” She glanced over at Kramer, obviously the sign for him to take over.

“We’d like to purchase back Malcolm Fontaine’s work desk. It was... accidentally sold in the estate auction. Maude had wanted to keep it for sentimental purposes.”

I thought about it. Still didn’t make sense. People keep a lot of things for sentimental purposes. But those things weren’t usually large pieces of furniture. My silence must have warned Maude of my train

of thought.

"He truly loved that desk. It seemed he was always sitting at it. Writing in his journals, or even just reading the paper. I'd intended to keep it for myself… but when he passed, I'm afraid I let it get away from me."

Sorry, still not buying it. And I decided I wanted to get a bit more information before saying anything. So I stayed clammed up.

"I'm afraid that's my fault," Kramer said, trying out a smile of his own. His was even more predatory than Maude's, and that was saying something. "Maude turned the handling of the auction over to me, and I'm afraid I didn't get her wishes accounted for before the sale."

When they said nothing further, my time had come. I just wished Orville was here for this. "I'm afraid the desk isn't for sale." I paused. "In fact, it was damaged this week by a burglar that broke into my shop. The curious thing is, the burglar only seemed to be interested in that desk. Kind of like you two. I'd be mighty interested to find out why the sudden interest in a desk that had been held at the auction house for months, and I bought days ago."

Kramer looked at Maude, whose face had turned a whole lot paler. Her fake tan didn't look nearly as good without a little color behind it.

Finally, he turned back to me. "But you still have the desk, correct? Can I please see it?" He hesitated. "To see how bad the damage is, I mean?"

"Don't matter how bad the damage is. Not to you, anyway. For one, I don't allow customers in my back room. And for two, I'd already decided to keep the desk for myself. It isn't for sale." My eyes met Maude's. "I do hope you thought to keep other sentimental things that will give you comfort."

"But you haven't heard our offer yet," Maude said, a slightly less sure of herself smile in place. "We're willing to give you double your money for it. And if it's damaged, that would make the offer even more worth your while, wouldn't it?"

She looked around the shop. I could tell from her eyes that it wasn't her kind of place. Well, she didn't know what she was missing, then, because the stuff I sold in my shop was quality. Some of the best things just aren't made anymore. You'd only find them in little places like mine.

"You are out to make a profit, right?"

"Usually, yes. But I'm keeping the desk."

Blood rushed to her cheeks and the smile, fake as it had been, vanished. She whirled to Kramer. "Can she do that?"

I folded my arms in front of me and leaned back. "I'd be interested to hear your answer to that one myself."

Only he didn't answer. Instead, he took her by the elbow and

guided her out of the front door. Neither of them looked very happy. At all.

Which made me even more anxious to take a much closer look at that desk. We were missing something. And with any luck, the burglar had missed it too.

I LEFT KIMBERLY UP front to man the shop, and I went back to get to work. First things first, I called the new local handyman to come and fix my door. According to Orville, the door seemed to be fine. It was the latch part of the frame that seemed to be damaged. I hoped that was good news rather than bad. Either way, I wanted it fixed by the end of the day.

With that call made, and the man's assurances that he would be out before noon to get me all fixed up, I turned again to the desk. "Now let's see just what secrets you hold."

I saved that middle left-hand drawer for last. I didn't want to miss anything this time, so I went slow. Each drawer came out smoothly, and I laid them side by side on my lab's worktable. With all the crazy goings on, I'd fallen behind with my spells and potions. My ready-made stock was quickly running out.

Whether or not I wanted to, I might have to take a dent in my pride and ask Ruby to come back. Even if it was just for a day. Between the two of us, we could knock out a lot of potions in a day's time. Maybe I could get her to agree to work a couple of days a month. That, at least, would help me keep the shelves stocked for the busier times.

I followed the procedure that Orville had gone through. Turning each drawer upside down, feeling around all the wooden edges, and then lightly tapping on the wood for any indication of a hidden space. Nothing.

That is until I came to that middle left-hand drawer. It was pretty slick how it was done too. I almost missed it, and I was looking for it.

The inside of the drawer was a little narrower than the others. That's because there was a small hidden space on either side. For all the world, it looked like a normal desk drawer. But once the drawer was removed, you could access the spaces by sliding a small two-inch wide piece of wood on either side of the back of the drawer up and out. Kind of like opening a battery compartment on some kind of electronic device.

Only instead of getting access to batteries, you got access to the desk's secrets.

The right side of the drawer held two small journals. I cracked them open just long enough to see that they were written by old man

Malcolm himself. That could make for interesting reading. The man had led an abundant life. And I could totally see someone who might be mentioned in the books wanting to make sure the information didn't get out.

I really thought I'd found it. The reason my poor desk and shop door had taken a beating.

Then I looked in the left-hand space.

That space held a single, thick brown envelope. The words on the outside made me gasp. An honest to goodness gasp. Me. The family matriarch of the Ravenswind clan and the High Priestess of the Goddess herself.

The last will and testament of Malcolm Fontaine.

Crap on a stick. This was so bad. And just like that, I was dialing Orville. No way was I opening that sealed envelope without a good reliable witness.

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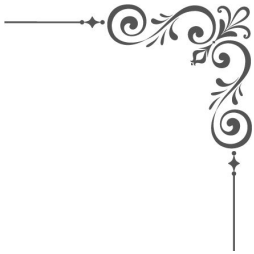

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Chapter 7

Here's the thing. A lot of people in Wind's Crossing didn't think that Malcolm Fontaine's death was one hundred percent natural.

Sure, there was an autopsy ran to put everyone's mind at ease. Not that it really worked.

I'm a witch, and I know my herbs and potions. I'm fairly certain that I could concoct something that would kill a person and still not show up in some toxicology test. Not that I have or ever would do such a thing. I'm just saying that it's possible.

And if I know that, then other witches know that too. Even if Maude Fontaine, Malcolm's young and beautiful trophy wife, wasn't a witch, it wouldn't be hard to find one. Not all witches are as straight as an arrow like us Ravenswinds. As much as it pains me to say, some could be bought for that green stuff called money.

They'd pay for it in the end. The Goddess doesn't go for things like that. And everything in life tends to come full circle back to you. It might take time, but it's coming for you. I much prefer seeding good things into that circle of fate rather than bad. Makes for a much nicer future.

Kimberly and I stood staring down at the envelope while waiting for the sheriff. It was still early, and the early bird customers had made quick purchases and left. We were counting on that little bell on the front door to alert us if anyone else showed up.

Finally, she looked over at me. "You thinking maybe those nasty rumors were true after all?"

I shrugged. I'd never been convinced they were false to begin with. Malcolm might have been in his late seventies, but when I saw him at his wedding two years ago, he was a healthy and vibrant man. Two months into his marriage, that had started to change. A little too fast for my liking.

Of course, the men in town all seemed to think it was a joke. Like being married to a pretty young thing was draining off his energy. But looking into his eyes, I had thought it was much more than that.

I'd felt sorry for the man. But then, he'd made his own bed. He'd have to deal with the repercussions of his own decisions. There was always the option of divorce.

Then, about a year ago, he'd dropped completely out of the public

eye. Became a recluse that never left his estate. And that just wasn't the Malcolm I'd known all my life.

There had even been a conversation with Orville about it. The whole situation had bugged me that much. But when Orville had gotten in to see Malcolm—they couldn't very well stop the sheriff from seeing him, now could they?—he'd said the man seemed happy enough, if a little worse for wear.

A short talk to his doctor later, and the whole thing was put to one side. At least with some people. Not so much with me.

The bell at the front rang, and I sniffed the air. Orville's aftershave cologne came wafting through into the back.

"We're back here, sheriff."

He ducked through the curtain and came up to us. "So, what was so important that I had to come rushing over?"

I'd positioned myself between him and the table. "Got something to show you. You know how we couldn't figure out what anyone would want with an empty drawer?"

He nodded.

"Well, as it turns out, they took the wrong blasted drawer. It's the whole right hand versus left-hand thing. You thought the thief took the left-hand drawer. Kimberly and I thought they took the right-hand drawer. Kind of a how you look at things thing."

Then I stepped to one side and motioned to the journals and thick envelope on the table behind me. Orville bent down to get a good look and then gave a whistle.

"Holy crap on a stick."

Yeah, that had been my thought, too, only even more colorful.

"How much you wanna bet the will inside that envelope doesn't leave everything to young Maude like the last one did?" Kimberly asked.

Orville shook his head. "Just because the envelope says the Last Will and Testament, doesn't mean it's actually the last one. This could be the first version, or a version written years and years ago before Maude ever entered the picture."

I took out my handkerchief—and yes, I still used them—and reached down to gently flip the envelope over. Right there on the back was a date, written in Malcolm's ornate and precise scrawl.

"Oh. I see."

The date was a week prior to his death. I was pretty sure that this was the Last Will all right.

I was also pretty sure that Kimberly was right, and that it would change things pretty drastically for the young widow.

ORVILLE TOOK THE WILL, but I kept the journals. I didn't feel bad about it, either.

The will was a legal document, and it rightly belonged in the hands of the attorney. Although, I was really hoping that Orville would insist on being present when the attorney opened the envelope. I'm not at all sure how much I trust the good Mr. Kramer, Attorney at law. It would be different if old Malcolm had used say the Mineheart Law Firm. I might not be all that fond of the Minehearts... I'm working on that... but I do trust them.

Mr. Kramer, I wasn't so sure of. Especially after the visit to my shop this morning. At the best of times, he was kind of, well, shady. That was ever so much more polite than saying he was as crooked as the day was long. Unfortunately, the latter was true none the less.

It rather shocked me that Malcolm had entrusted him with such an important task as his will. But then again, maybe he hadn't. Now I was kind of wishing that I hadn't let that packet out of my sight without a gander at what was inside. It was quite possible that Malcolm had used another, more trusted attorney for this one.

In fact, the more I thought about it, the surer I was that would have been the case. I mean, if he had used Kramer, then Kramer would have known there was another, secret, will. And obviously, he hadn't known it. Or had he?

Gah! I was conflicted. Enough so that I speed dialed Orville.

"Please tell me you don't have another emergency," he said in lieu of a greeting. "I just left there five minutes ago."

"No emergency but a pretty urgent thought." Then I paused. I hoped he would think it was as urgent as I did. Of course, he could also see it as me trying to tell him how to do his job. I didn't want that. Just what I needed, more confliction.

"Yes?"

Taking a deep breath, I just blurted it out. "I'm not sure that taking that will to Kramer is the right thing to do." Then I held my breath, hoping he didn't take my words the wrong way. I'd told him about the visit this morning, so at least he was up to speed on that.

What did he do? He laughed.

"Oh, I'm way ahead of you there. I just got off the phone from your new brother-in-law. I'm taking it to him tonight after work." A slight pause. "You want to tag along?"

I hesitated. I felt bad leaving Kimberly with all the kids two nights in one week. "How would you feel about having two tag alongs?"

"Only two? Why not bring the whole family and make an event of it? I'll even spring for dinner out. Kid's Meals for everyone."

That's one of the things I loved about my man. He truly got me and knew how much my family meant to me.

I smiled into the phone. “That sounds perfectly lovely. I’ll check with Kimberly and let you know.”

“No need. I’ll just plan on picking you all up around six tonight unless I hear differently. I can’t see Kimberly being too upset about a night out, can you?”

“No.” Another brief hesitation. “A night in without the kids would work for her too.”

“That would work for me, too. Either way, it’s fine with me. Little Mason needs some man time, anyway.”

“He does at that.” You see, I could take exception to Orville’s words and make an issue, but the truth was… he was right. Poor little Mason being stuck as the only male in an entire house filled with females? Sometimes I felt sorry for the little guy. Having Orville take an interest in spending time with him was a good thing.

Made me love Orville just a little bit more too. Hadn’t thought that was possible.

It took me all of two minutes to check with Kimberly. As I’d expected, she was thrilled at the prospect of a childless night. Can’t say I blamed her. Being a mom was hard work. Especially when you were doing it without a partner.

Yes, Kimberly had me, but it wasn’t the same. I knew she didn’t like asking me for time off from her motherly duties. I’d been a little lax on taking the initiative in offering. I needed to up my game a little there. Maybe make it a one night a week thing? A little bonding time with all the kiddos couldn’t hurt me, either. Well, it might wear me out a bit, but it’d be good all the same.

With the evening all arranged, and the front shop in Kimberly’s capable hands, I sat down with Malcolm’s journals. They were works of art all in themselves. Trust Malcolm not to scrimp, even on personal journals. The leather was supple and soft, and the pages were of a high-quality paper made so that an occasional ink blot wouldn’t bleed through to the next page. The main selling point, though, was the Fontaine family crest being engraved within the leather cover. They really were quite striking.

It kind of made me want to design a family crest for the Ravenswind family. Now that I thought of it, I’m rather surprised Mother had never had that done. Better late than never, I suppose. My fingers traced the elaborate design on Malcolm’s newest journal as I thought about it. A moon would definitely be a given, but what else? What could we include to give homage to the Goddess and to our element of Air as well? Perhaps this would make a good family project. Suddenly, it seemed like far too big of a task for a solitary witch. Even if I was the family matriarch now.

With an effort of will, I pushed the thoughts of family crests from

my mind, took a deep breath, and opened the latest journal. It was rather obvious that it was the latest, as it still smelled new, and there were words written in Malcolm's elegant scrawl only covering about half the pages. His life had run out before the pages in the journal had. Kind of sad, that. Like unfinished business.

The beginning date was from a month before he died. After reading a few pages, it was evident that Malcolm had known his health was failing. There was still the possibility in my mind that someone might have been helping that along, but it didn't appear to be the thoughts of Malcolm. No, he blamed it more on his young wife.

Not in the she's killing me way, but rather in a 'keeping her happy is killing me' kind of way. There's a difference. No malicious intent was necessary for the latter to still be true.

I had to smile as Malcolm told of all the parties and fundraisers he had had to endure. Not so many at the time of the writing, however. By the time this journal had started, those days had been behind him. His health was too far gone at that point.

That's most likely why his mind took the turn it did. The turn into thinking of how he'd lived his life and all the mistakes he'd made along the way. He desperately seemed to want to put them right. At least some of them.

He talked about leaving certain bequests to certain people, and then, as I turned the page expecting yet another page droning on, two small photos peered up from between the pages.

The pictures were obviously of the same girl but from different stages of her life. The first photo was of a smiling newborn, wrapped in a soft pink blanket with a knitted pink hat on. A few black curls escaped the hat, though. This was not your average bald little baby. Even baby Pearl hadn't had this much hair when she was born. It was growing in nicely now, but there for a while... no.

The next picture was of a girl, maybe around six years old. A beautiful little girl, tall and slender with curly black hair, bright green eyes (eyes that reminded me of Malcolm's own), and a brilliant smile. In the photo, she was smiling at the camera and clutching a rolled diploma. Kindergarten graduation, perhaps?

My breath came quicker as I moved the pictures from the words they were covering. Pay dirt. The journal was finally getting interesting.

"I've been thinking a lot lately about dear Maggie and our daughter. I never should have let things end the way they did. But when one has a powerful—and yes, vindictive—wife, one cannot readily come forward as the father of an illegitimate child. No matter how much one desperately wants to do so. When Maggie and the baby disappeared, I knew in my heart of hearts that Katrina had been

involved. But, fool that I was, I was too cowardly to confront her about her actions."

I swallowed. Malcolm and Katrina had not been able to have children, hence the no heirs situation that had brought a gold-digger like Maude on the scene. But if there truly was an heir, surely she would be entitled to at least a portion of the estate? His next words proved me right.

"I may have been a coward then, but no longer. I have created a new will, which I am keeping in my private desk along with these journals for safety. I will not do wrong by Maude. She will still be taken care of. Only not by quite so wide a margin as what she had been expecting when she married an old fool like me. It's time I did right by little Ashley. It's too late to make things right by Maggie. That's a fact that I'll regret right up to my dying day. Perhaps I can make my amends to her on the other side. But for Ashley Connor Fontaine, I intend to make things right now."

My eyes strayed to those brilliant green eyes in the photos. How hard would it be to find her now? And was it too late to produce the new will? So many questions.

"I have reached out to Callista at the Golden Daze Bed and Breakfast. She and Maggie were close once. If anyone knows where my precious Ashley is now, it would be her. Perhaps it isn't too late for us to make our amends on this side. An old man can only pray that might be the case."

My eyes were tearing up, so I closed the journal and pushed it to one side. How sad would it be to have spent an entire lifetime without knowing or even meeting your own daughter?

Not being there for their first steps. Not hearing their very first words. And most of all, not being there when they needed you most. I didn't really know how a strong man like Malcolm could have made a decision to live a life like that. But he had.

And now it was time to make it right. He'd run out of time to do that. So now, it was up to me.

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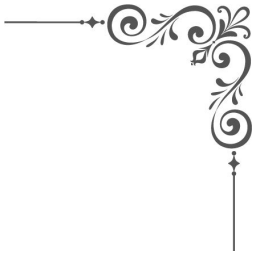

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Chapter 8

I wasn't sure how to approach Orville with the news of the new heir. Part of me was afraid he would correct his earlier mistake and take the journals from me as well. I didn't want that to happen before I'd had a chance to read them all. I still wasn't totally convinced that Maude hadn't been slipping the old man something to make his slide into ill health go a little—or a lot—faster. If there was something in there that pointed in that direction, I wanted it found.

Not that I didn't trust Orville. He wouldn't be my man if I didn't. But law enforcement moves far too slowly at times like these. I wanted justice done. And the sooner the better for me. I didn't want those journals sitting in an evidence room somewhere just waiting for someone to have the time to read them. Like that would happen anytime soon. A sheriff's office is a busy place, even at the best of times.

I'd stay up tonight and read the journals and tell him in the morning. It would be hard to explain to him why I waited, but then again, he wouldn't have to know I'd started reading them before our little trip to Oak Hill to see Archie and my sister, now would he?

The baby's bag was packed—I'd forgotten what a chore it was to prepare for an outing with a baby. It felt like I was taking half the nursery with us! But then you never know what you'll need, now do you? Diapers, changes of clothes, a bottle (and a spare just in case), and countless other things were stuffed into the bag until it was on the point of bursting.

Kimberly laughed when she lifted it. "What all do you have in this thing?"

I grunted. "Hopefully everything we might need tonight."

She shook her head. "Feels like you've got yourself covered for a week." She raised an eyebrow at me. "You will be back tonight, right?"

I saw her raised eyebrow and added in a smirk. "The kids have school tomorrow, don't they? As much as they might want to stay over with Sapphire, their education comes first."

Of course, baby Pearl didn't have school, but it was still far too soon for her to be having overnight stays away from her mother and me. Sapphire might be a possible exception to that rule. But my heart

just wasn't ready for even that tiny step yet. Baby Pearl was beyond special to me.

Kimberly might not know yet just how special baby Pearl was to me, but I think she was beginning to have her suspicions. One of these days, when I thought she could handle it, I'd have to tell her. Everything. But that would not be today. Probably not tomorrow, either. Or even this year. But someday, it would become inevitable. Pearl would come into her power one day. It wouldn't be a secret any longer then.

She looked like she might be going to say something more, but lucky for me, that's when Orville showed up. So instead, she just shrugged and called up the stairs for Mason and Nancy to come down.

I was half afraid to look at them once they reached the bottom of the stairs. Generally, it took them about five minutes from the time we walked in the front door for them to look like homeless, and very dirty, bums. Imagine my surprise when that wasn't the case. I'd been fully prepared for a general scrub down before heading out the door. Now it wasn't needed.

From the proud look on Nancy's face, I could tell this was her doing. I hid my grin as I caught a look at Mason's wet and slicked-back hair. The boy had a cowlick that simply refused to be tamed without wetting that hair down. Unfortunately, Nancy hadn't done a very good job of getting some of the water back out. There were droplets of water still dripping down the poor boy's face.

But she had tried, and I wasn't about to take that away from her.

"It's a long car ride over to Sapphire's new house," I warned them. "Did you bring something to pass the time with?"

Nancy nodded. "I have my book, and I loaned Mason my tablet for the ride. He really likes the new jigsaw puzzle app you got for me." She ruffled Mason's hair, then tried to discretely wipe her now wet hand on her jeans. "He's pretty good at it. As good as me, even."

Mason just nodded, looking proud. "Plus, I got some questions for the sheriff, if that's okay?"

"I'm sure the sheriff will be fine with that."

"What is it I'll be fine with?" Orville asked from behind me. I'd been so intent on the kids that I had failed to notice that Kimberly had opened the door for him.

"I got some questions for you," Mason said, shyly. The boy was a little demon sometimes around us women, but let Orville or another man show up, and he turned shy and bashful. He definitely needed some one on one time with a good man. A man like Orville.

"Well, then, ask away, cowboy. But maybe we should wait till we're all in the car, okay?"

Mason nodded.

“Think you could carry that diaper bag out for your Aunt Opal?”

Kimberly shot me a worried glance, and I cringed on the inside. Just maybe I had packed too much stuff after all.

But Mason was up to the challenge. Even if the bag did only make it an inch off the ground. And he had to take a few rest breaks between the porch and the car. The boy wasn’t about to give up. And we weren’t about to make light of him by offering to help, either. The look on his face when he finally reached the car with the bag was worth it.

Orville opened his trunk and then reached down for the bag. He did a slight double-take, then looked over at me. “What the devil you got in this thing? A bag of bricks?”

Mason giggled and jumped in the backseat. Nancy helped him get buckled in and then turned to take baby Pearl’s traveling car seat and get it situated onto its base. We’d decided to take my car because that base could be a genuine pain to get in and out of vehicles.

Once everyone got situated and buckled in, Orville pulled out of the drive. That’s right, Orville was driving. It was a rule, even when we took my car. Mind you, it was a rule I didn’t mind at all. It was nice being chauffeured around for a while instead of being the one behind the wheel. Let someone else bear that responsibility for a change.

Of course, the reason Orville insisted wasn’t as pleasant to think of. I’d thought it was just him establishing his claims on masculinity… as if he had to…, but come to find out, the man didn’t like the way I drove. The nerve of the man.

Still, the end result was the same. I got a free pass on driving, so I kept my trap shut, mostly anyway, and just enjoyed the free rides.

After he turned out onto the main road, Orville glanced in the rearview mirror back at Mason. “So, what was it you wanted to ask me, Champ?”

I glanced back, too, in time to see Mason blush and look out the side window. “My teacher told us that we were going to have a career day. So if any of us had Dads or Uncles that had interesting or exciting jobs, we should ask them to come and talk to us. Only…”

Orville looked over at me but didn’t say anything. Neither of us wanted to rush the boy. This was his show. Let him ask. It would mean more.

Nancy, however, was a bit more impatient than the two of us. She elbowed Mason. He grunted, but then went on.

“Only, I don’t really have a dad, or uncles, either for that matter.” He hesitated, then deftly dodged another elbow from Nancy. Not an easy thing to do when you were pretty much locked into place by a seatbelt. “So I was wondering… I mean, I call Opal my aunt, would it

be okay if... if I called you my uncle?"

I could tell the boy was holding his breath. I really hoped that Orville wouldn't keep him waiting for long. Should have known that wouldn't happen.

"Well, we might not be blood-related, but some of the best relationships aren't tied by blood, you know. So, yes, Mason, I would be very happy to be your uncle."

Mason's grin could have lit up the whole car. "Awesome! And would you come to talk to my class?"

Orville nodded. "Sure. I do that all the time. But this time, I will let your teacher know that I'm doing it as a special favor to my unrelated nephew."

"I told you he'd say yes," Nancy whispered. Mason gave her an elbow of his own, and all was right with the world again.

The kids dove into their chosen forms of entertainment after that, and the car got quiet. Too quiet, it would seem, for Orville. "Just tell me what you've got on your mind already. The suspense is killing me."

Sometimes having a man that could read you like a book was a real pain. Like when you'd decided to keep a secret from him. Even if it was only going to be for one short night. I could knuckle down and deny it, of course, but that would only disappoint him when I told him tomorrow. He'd know. And a tiny bit of the built-up trust we had between us would be damaged forever.

I took a deep breath. "Well, I started reading Malcolm's journals today. Started with the most recent, things being what they are."

"And..."

Another deep breath. "And, according to his journal, Malcolm had a daughter. One he'd never officially claimed. A woman named Ashley Conner Fontaine."

Orville's eyes flashed over to me for a split second and the car did just the tiniest of swerves. Enough so that I grinned at him. His eyes went back to the road. "That doesn't count, you know. You shouldn't spring things like that on a man while he's driving."

"I believe you were the one that asked me."

He grunted. "I'm guessing the journal says the will left everything to Ashley then?"

I shook my head. "Not everything, but enough to make Maude decidedly unhappy, I'm thinking. We'll know for sure once we open that will."

Orville got quiet, and I could tell something was bothering him. "You got access to the internet on that outdated phone of yours?"

"Not outside of my house or the shop, no. It needs Wifi to connect." Then I stared at him. Hard. "Why?"

One hand came off the wheel to scrub at his chin. “Because that name sounds awfully familiar to me. Ashley Conner, not the Fontaine part. But I’m guessing she didn’t go by that part if she hadn’t been formally acknowledged by Malcolm.”

“Familiar how?”

He shook his head. “I deal with too many cases to be sure. But I’m sure I’ve run into that name in the past. Give me a minute.” Then he shifted in the seat to thrust out his hip at me. “My phone is in my pocket. Could you get it out for me?” He grinned at me. “Just the phone, no funny business.”

I smacked his arm before retrieving the cell phone. It wasn’t a simple task from my position, or from the tightness of Orville’s jeans either. Not that I minded the tightness one bit—at least whenever I wasn’t trying to wrestle a phone from a tight pocket’s clutches, anyway.

Finally, I had the phone in hand. “Now what?”

“Dial my office and then put it on speakerphone.”

“Sheriff’s Office, if this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 9-1-1.”

“It’s me, Gretta.”

My eyebrow rose. I didn’t recall a woman named Gretta working for the sheriff’s office. And the fact that Orville hadn’t mentioned hiring someone new was a tad troublesome. Normally he shared things like that with me.

“Oh, hi Sheriff, how they hanging?”

My other eyebrow rose, and I tilted my head at him. He blushed. Another bad sign.

“As they should, Gretta. Look, can you do me a quick favor and look up the name Ashley Conner in our system? I can’t recall where I know it from.”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.” There was a moment’s pause before she was back on the line. “Ashley Renee Conner died in a vehicular accident outside Wind’s Crossing last year. Drove off the road, rolled down an embankment, and struck a tree. The coroner ruled that she would have died instantly. They put it down as an accidental death. There was mention of Ms. Connor having just come from a bar, and an open container in the car, so alcohol was believed to have been involved.”

Orville nodded at the phone, his eyes flicking over to me. “Thanks, Gretta.”

Before he could tell me to disconnect the call, Gretta got out a question. “So, have you thought any more about that dinner invitation? A man’s got to eat, you know. And I make a mean meatloaf.”

He blushed again, his eyes no longer meeting mine. “I’ll have to

get back with you on that one, Gretta." Then he reached out and pushed to end the call himself. No car swerve this time.

So that phone call had resulted in two disturbing revelations. One, I had an obvious rival for the sheriff's affections. Well, I'd always known there were women in Wind's Crossing that had an eye out for him. What I hadn't known was that one of them now worked for him. That was troubling to me.

But the other revelation had more meaning to the case at hand. Ashley Conner Fontaine, the newly discovered heir to the Fontaine fortune, was dead.

And somehow, I just wasn't buying the whole accidental death thing.

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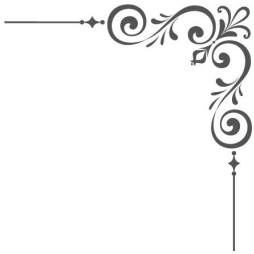

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Chapter 9

Sapphire and Archie had a buffet of sorts waiting for us when we got there. She seemed a little put out when she saw the kid's meal boxes.

"I thought you all were coming for dinner?"

Actually, dinner had never been mentioned. But then with the time of day, and it being my sister, I'd been pretty sure food would be involved at some point. At least I'd managed to get Orville to wait on dinner for the two of us. That should count for something.

I shrugged. "Come on, Sapphire, you know it's all about the toys, right? They'll still nibble on your food, I promise." In fact, both kids had immediately run to the buffet and started loading down plates right after giving out hugs.

That appeased her a bit. "Well, I guess that's okay then." She laughed when she saw the gusto that the kids were applying to filling out their plates. "More than okay. In fact, we'd better get plates ourselves or we might be having Kid's Meal leftovers ourselves."

She wasn't wrong.

We'd barely started chewing before Archie looked across the table at Orville. "So, I understand you brought me something to take a look at?"

Sapphire shot him a mean glance, but he just smiled at her. "I know, dear, no business during dinner. But I think we can make an exception this one time, don't you?"

She took an exaggeratedly deep breath but finally nodded. "I suppose so. After all, they traveled a good way for your help. Plus, it's a school night, so we'll need to wrap up the business fairly quickly." She looked over at me. "I fully expect a weekend visit soon, just so you know."

I shrugged. "Roads work both ways. You know you're welcome at the farmhouse any time. It's not like your name isn't still on the deed to the place. It's still your home, if and when you need it again." Even if I had kind of redistributed her space to fit the current situation. Not like I expected her to take me up on the offer any time soon. I was waiting for the honeymoon phase to wear off. I was pretty sure it would, eventually. Truthfully, I'd expected that to happen before now. Archie was craftier than I'd given him credit for.

Or maybe the two of them really did have an everlasting love that would last through the ages. Air and Earth. Why was it so very hard for me to recognize that as a true possibility? After all, my man—or the man I thought of as mine, anyway—wasn't even a witch at all.

"While it's very kind of you to let Sapphire know that, I don't think she'll be taking you up on that offer any time soon. Will you, dear?"

Sapphire looked thoughtful.

"Dear?" Was that just a hint of worry in Archie's voice?

"Oh, you're right, of course, sweetie. I'm very happy here, although I'll admit that I do occasionally miss the farmhouse. I did so love the woods and garden out back. It truly is a witch's dream home, you know." She paused. "It's just that I hadn't really thought about my name still being on the deed. That doesn't seem quite right to me. How would one go about taking it off?"

I shook my head. "Not happening, sister. Not if I have anything to say about it. If anything happens to the two of us that farmhouse goes to our children. Wouldn't be right to knock Ruby out of her inheritance just because you found true love." I almost choked on the true love bit, but I got it out.

Her thoughtful look didn't go away. "Let me think about that a bit, will you?"

I didn't like the sound of that, but what could I say? Besides, Orville took over the conversation before I could reply anyway, dragging it back on track.

"Back to your original question, Archie. Yes, I brought you a will to look at. Unfortunately, there has already been a will read. Also unfortunately, I'm afraid it was a much earlier one than the one I have to give you. I think things have changed."

Archie raised an eyebrow. "Is this will from one of my clients?"

Orville shook his head. "I only wish it were. But no, I just want your opinion on it before I give it to the attorney for the Fontaines."

Archie leaned back in his chair, his widened eyes locked on Orville. "Are we talking the last will and testament for Malcolm Fontaine?"

"That would be the one, yes."

Archie looked over at Sapphire with a sad smile. "I know I'll pay for this later, and I'm willing to accept that. For what it's worth, I'm sorry." Then he gathered up his plate and nodded to Orville. "Bring the will with you."

I wanted nothing more than to follow the men, plate in hand. But I knew better. Archie might well be prepared to accept the repercussions of that insubordination, but I was not. Especially when, with a little patience shown on my part, the outcome would still be the same. It wasn't like my presence would actually change anything.

But it did make it harder to concentrate on our sisterly conversation. By the time our plates were emptied and taken to the kitchen, Sapphire sighed and shook her head at me. “Go on. I want some time with the kiddos, anyway.” Then she turned to them. “Let me change that rather suspicious smelling diaper on Pearl, and then I’ve got something to show the two of you up in the attic.”

The attic? Okay, she did that on purpose. I run a second-hand shop slash antique shop. And I’d been in my sister’s new home’s attic before. It was literally a dream come true for a shop owner like me. I wanted more time up there, dang it. And Sapphire knew it.

“Go on, Opal. We all have to have our priorities, you know.”

I took a deep breath, but she was right. My first duty right now was to get justice for poor old Malcolm and any rightful heirs that he might have chosen. The attic could wait. But don’t think I wouldn’t be pumping Nancy for information on it during the ride home. We had to talk about something, right? And there was a whole lot of attic I hadn’t even glimpsed yet.

The men were deep in conversation when I walked into Archie’s home office. The silence was instant at my entrance.

“What? The man’s dead. He can’t bloody well have secrets now, can he?”

Archie looked at Orville before shaking his head. “No, I guess he can’t. But this will be a very tricky situation. It’s going to require a certain… finesse.”

Now I was getting offended. “You think I can’t keep a secret? Me? Opal Ravenswind?”

Orville crossed the room in record time and threw an arm around me. “That isn’t what he was saying at all, Opal. We just have to work extra hard to keep things under our hats until we have a chance to do some research and see what’s what.”

“The will wasn’t as straight forward as it should have been, was it?”

Archie hesitated. “Oh, it’s straight forward enough. It’s just that with Ashley Conner dead before the will was opened… and before Malcolm dying… well, it creates a bit of a problem to see Malcolm’s wishes done the right way.”

“You aren’t going to tell me what’s in that will, are you?”

Orville’s arm tightened around me. “It isn’t a lack of trust, Opal. You have to know that. But this is strictly a need to know situation, and right now, well… you don’t need to know.”

“The bloody thing was in a drawer of a desk that I am now the rightful owner of. Don’t suppose that means a dadgum thing to the two of you, does it?”

“Sorry, Opal.”

My hand flew to my chest. My mind had been laser-focused on the conversation at hand, and I'd missed the earlier warning signs. But now my pendant was making sure that mistake was corrected. It was practically on fire.

"Someone's in my shop."

SAPPHIRE WAS ON BOARD instantly, as was Archie. They offered to give the kids a ride home once their visit was through, with the strict condition that we would call them immediately once we knew what the devil was going on back at the shop.

That was fair enough to me. The kids didn't need to be in the car with the way Orville was currently driving. The man was driving like a demon straight from the devil's clutches. It wasn't a boring ride at all. Especially after we'd had to waste precious moments getting baby Pearl's car seat base out.

He had me put the call into his dispatch to get men over there right away. Orville knew better than to doubt my alert. Shoot, his driving told me that.

I clutched the door as once again we rounded a curve going about twenty miles an hour faster than I was comfortable with. Why, oh why, did the road between my house and my sister's house have to be so darn full of twists and turns? Where was a nice, safe straight road when you needed one?

Orville glanced over at me. "Don't worry. I got this. I just wish I had a bubble light for the roof. I'm putting one in your glove box after this, just so you know."

"Whatever you say, Orville."

He chuckled. The man actually chuckled. "Are your eyes closed?"

I opened one and directed it at him. "It's easier not to backseat drive that way. Can't have it both ways."

"Gotcha."

Another curve and my heart was once again in my throat. Even if I couldn't see them, I could still feel them. Either way, it was far more excitement than I wanted at the moment. Yes, I wanted to get to the shop as soon as possible. But I wanted us and my car to be in one, undamaged piece when we did. Well, three individual undamaged pieces if you wanted to get technical about it.

I'd never been so glad to see my little shop as I was when Orville finally tore into the back parking lot, tires actually squealing. That's a sound my poor tires had never had to make before. Once we were stopped, I noticed the old beat-up Ford truck we were parked beside.

"Looks like we might have still caught him inside. You stay here. I'm going in." He opened the door and got out, only to find me

standing right behind him. I can move quickly when I have to.

"You don't have your gun. I'm coming with you."

He frowned at me. "You don't have a gun, either, do you?"

I waved both my hands at him. "No, but I have something you don't. And that part of me is locked and loaded."

I heard the sirens in the distance. A sad thing that we beat his officers to the scene. Especially when you thought about how far away we'd been when we started the run. "He's going to know we're coming."

Orville nodded. "Stay behind me, and that isn't up for debate."

That, I could live with.

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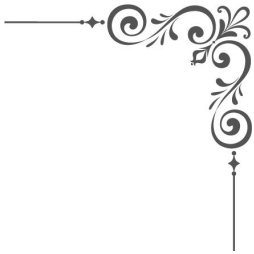

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Chapter 10

I no longer had a back door to the shop. Not one that was repairable, anyway. Someone had taken an ax to it. Now, it was nothing more than splinters and chunks.

Orville glanced behind him at me briefly, pointing to the door. I got it. The man (or woman) inside was most likely armed with a sharp blade if nothing else. It upped the danger risk by far.

He pointed to the car, and once again I shook my head. But I did start calling in the magic. I wanted to be ready to face whatever it was we were about to face.

After a deep breath, and moving fast, Orville dashed into the back room. Then he stopped so suddenly that I actually ran into the back of him.

"What?" I whispered. But he didn't have to answer me, because I had eyes as well as he did.

The streetlight at the back of the shop gave just enough light through the window and new door opening for us to see the destroyed desk. The ax that had been used on my back door had been taken to it as well. There would be no repairing it this time. There wasn't enough left to repair.

But the door, the desk, the shambles they'd left of my shop—and it was in shambles—meant absolutely nothing when you considered the amount of blood on the floor in front of us.

Not to mention, of course, the bloody ax right there beside the puddle.

Looking down at the floor, I could see a trail of the stuff leading back out the door. In fact, my feet were firmly on it. These shoes would go in the trash as soon as I got home. If the sheriff didn't confiscate them for evidence, that is.

I could see that Orville was conflicted. Did he take the time to search the shop, or did he follow the trail of blood? And what would he do about his unwanted tag along? Namely, me.

Luckily, he didn't have to stay conflicted for long. A blaring deputy's car tore into the back lot and within seconds, two deputies were standing by us.

"Search the shop and make sure no one is still here. Keep the crime scene as clean as possible. Stick to the edges and touch nothing. And

I'm going to need the keys to the patrol car," Orville told them.

The deputy with the keys didn't look too happy about it, but he couldn't very well question his boss, now could he? He handed them over.

Orville took my elbow and led me to the patrol car.

"If you're thinking about locking me in the back and leaving me there, I think you'll find you have more than a little trouble carrying out that plan."

He shook his head. "A great idea, now that you've mentioned it, but not my original intention."

Slipping the key into the trunk's lock, he popped the trunk and rummaged inside. When he stood back up, he had a rifle in one hand and a taser in the other.

Slamming the trunk lid back into place, he looked at me, then handed me the taser. "Now let's see where the blood leads us."

I nodded. Frankly, I thought the taser would be overkill for a woman with my other particular skill set, but I wasn't complaining all the same. Magic might take a few seconds to work. Tasers were pretty much instantaneous. In fact, I might have to ask my niece where to find one of my own.

Especially if this kind of thing was going to continue happening to me.

The blood trail didn't go far. It led us along the back of the shop and over to the pickup truck. Now that we were closer, we could see that the driver's side door was open. That side of the truck had been away from us before.

And that's where the trail ended. Right there in the lifeless body of Vince Riley, no good thief for hire.

Should have known he would have been involved.

Orville stepped in just close enough to check for a pulse, but from his head shake, I could tell Vince would not be up to no good ever again. His reign of petty thefts and mischief had ended.

I'm not going to say the world will miss a man like that. But I sure as shooting wish he'd gone and gotten himself killed somewhere else.

"I need to check in with the deputies," Orville said. "I'm afraid I can't really let you inside to do a check until the crime scene team gets here." He scrubbed his chin. "Actually, we could really use Amie for this one. Think she'd be willing to make the drive and bring her camera?"

My niece Amie sometimes did crime scene photos for his department. The county even paid for them now, thanks to the Sheriff's insistence. I nodded. "I'll call her. Take her a while to get here though."

"Sooner would be better than later. Stay here. I'll be back as soon

as I can. Get in the car and warm up." Then he bent down to give me a brief peck on the top of the head and walked back into the shop.

Me? I was looking around to see if anyone had seen that last move of his. The sheriff was getting more and more careless with those public displays of affection. We'd have to be having a talk soon about that.

I got in the car, turned it on, and cranked up the heat. Then I pulled out my phone and called in Amie. Sure enough, she was up for the job. I'd known she wouldn't turn it down. The sheriff and the Ravenswinds go way back. If he needed something that any of us could provide for him, he'd have it. The good thing was that it went both ways.

I'll admit that I'm not a patient woman. Sitting in that car without knowing the full extent of the damage to my shop was one of the harder things I've had to do in my life.

Fifteen minutes later, and yes I was timing him, Orville returned to me. "The shop is empty and other than the backroom, nothing looks like it's been disturbed. The focus was on the desk."

I swallowed and nodded. "And my shelves?" My heart was kind of in my throat waiting for his answer. While inside, my field of vision had mostly centered on that little red puddle in the middle of my floor. Orville had hustled me out of there too quickly for me to check out my magic stock. I would have to either stop keeping it there or up my security to the big times.

He gave a grunt of a laugh. "Trust that to be your main concern. But yes, they appeared to be fine." Orville pulled out his phone and pushed a few buttons. "I figured you'd want a visual of them, so I snapped a couple quick shots. I just emailed them to you. I know you can't do a true inventory from photos, but at least it's something."

"Thank you, sheriff, that means a lot."

One hand went up to scratch his head. "You'd best go on home, Opal. There's nothing you can do here, and I will be awhile. It's going to be a long night, I'm afraid."

I hesitated. "You're sure I can't help in some way?"

He smiled at me. "You already have. Amie's on her way, right?"

I nodded.

"Then go home. I'll call you with an update in the morning." Then he bent down and gave me a brief kiss, right there on the lips, and right there under the dang streetlight.

As good as it felt to know how much he cared about me, I'd have to move that talk up real soon.

KIMBERLY AND THE KIDS were waiting for me when I pulled into the

drive at the farmhouse. Sapphire and Archie had stuck around too.

"I wanted to call you, but I just kept picturing a ringing phone at the worst possible moment, so I didn't," Sapphire said. "Is everything okay?"

"It will be... for me anyway. I can't say the same for Vince Riley."

"You guys managed to catch him in the act? He's in jail? Wow, the sheriff must have driven like a bat out of... well, you know where," Archie said, with a glance towards the kids watching us with widened eyes.

"That's not exactly what happened." I looked at the kids too. How much did I really want to go into this with them standing right there? But then again, with the rumor mill alive and active in Wind's Crossing, they'd most likely hear all about it in school tomorrow. Might as well get the real truth from me tonight.

"We found Vince Riley dead in the front of his pickup truck in the shop's back parking lot. Looks like someone caught him during the break-in and killed him. Guess it's a good thing I have an unbreakable alibi on this one, huh?"

"I'll admit with the recent crime spree on your shop and your reputation for getting even, it's a very good thing that you happened to be with the sheriff tonight. No one could have a better alibi than that," Archie said. "Otherwise, you'd be on the top of the suspect list for sure."

"And for good reason," I said. "Three break-ins resulting in damage to my shop in less than a week? I thought I had a reputation of a woman not to be messed with. It seems that reputation is slipping a little."

It was little, but I saw Sapphire's eyes when they widened. So I wasn't one bit surprised when she pulled me to one side.

"Opal, did you do another Karma spell?" she whispered.

"Before I answer that, you should know that I've learned from past mistakes. My Karma spells are much more focused now."

Now her eyes narrowed. "Do tell."

I glanced at the others. They were far enough away to not hear our lowered voices, but they were watching us with great interest. "Go on, all of you. Nothing to see here."

They didn't look happy about it, but they did spread out a little. Nancy, Goddess love her, took the hint and gathered Mason and baby Pearl and went upstairs with them. Kimberly followed. Reluctantly, but she followed.

Archie stood firm. He wasn't going anywhere. Fair enough. I'd just have to settle for an audience of one.

"That whole thing with Valerie a few months back woke me up, Sapphire. Shoot, it would wake anybody up. Nowadays when I cast a

Karma spell, I give the spell a few parameters."

"Like?" That was my sister to a tee. Not giving me an inch.

"Like telling it to focus on a person's nether regions for starters. Nothing life-threatening. Something that would be more than a little annoying and uncomfortable. Especially if they had to sit for long periods of time."

Sapphire burst out laughing. "You cast a Karma spell to give the man hemorrhoids?"

"Seemed fitting to me. There isn't anything funny about having hemorrhoids, and eventually, I kind of figured I'd check with the local pharmacist and see who'd been buying an extra supply of that cream. And well, I'd know who the man behind the break-ins was. Now wouldn't I?"

Sapphire nodded, still laughing. "Oh Opal, never change. I do miss you, you know."

She gathered me in a fierce hug which I was only too happy to return.

Dang it all, I missed her too. More than she'd probably ever know.

They left a few minutes later after going up to say goodbye to the kids. I saw them off down the driveway to the main road, then went up to help Kimberly get the kids in bed.

I kind of figured with the events of the evening that could become a painful process. Unfortunately, I was right.

There was one thing I could think of to do to help that. Get their minds back on happier ground. Besides, I'll admit that my curiosity was a part of it too.

"So," I said, looking down at Mason's wide-awake face staring up at me from his little twin bed. "What was in the attic that Sapphire wanted to show you guys?"

His eyes lit up. "A whole room stuffed with old toys! It was awesome! And she told us that we could take our pick of anything up there." He looked a little disappointed. "There was a really cool bouncing horse, but Aunt Sapphire said you guys couldn't fit it in the trunk of the car. So I had to choose something else this time."

I reached down and patted his shoulder. "Don't you worry, son. I'm pretty sure you'll have that horse right here in your room very soon."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely." Sapphire wouldn't bait a kid like that. She'd see to it the thing got delivered in the next few days. If not, I'd remind her. A promise is a promise. "So what did you choose for tonight?"

The smile was back in full force, but he didn't even have a chance to answer. Nancy called in from her room through the open connecting door. "He got a magic kit. Can you believe it?"

Mason stuck his tongue out in the direction of Nancy's room, then

grinned back at me. “It’s really cool. And as far as I can tell, all the pieces are still in it too. I can’t wait to learn some tricks.”

Some witches have a problem with the so-called magicians of the world. Some of them had a trace of magic in their blood. Those could be seen as witches exploiting the gifts of the Goddess for personal gain. Other magicians didn’t have an ounce of magic in their entire body. I was thinking little Mason might be one of the latter.

Actually, that was good news as far as I was concerned.

“And I can’t wait to see them. If you practice and get good enough, maybe you can give the family a magic show.”

He nodded, then yawned. “That would be awesome.”

I ruffled his hair and bent down to kiss his forehead. “But even the great magicians need their sleep. Goodnight, Mason.”

“Goodnight, Aunt Opal,” he returned the words almost unrecognizable around the giant yawn they were surrounded by.

After tucking him in, I went through the door into Nancy’s room. She was in bed and all covered up too, just waiting for my nightly tuck in.

“That was smart of you to get his mind off things like that,” she whispered. “I think he’ll sleep a lot better now.”

There were nights when Mason had nightmares. None of us knew that more than Nancy, as she was the one that got him calmed down most times. Often before we ever managed to get to his room.

I smiled at her. “So, what did you get from the attic?” Just because she knew what I’d done with Mason didn’t necessarily mean it wouldn’t work with her too. Did it?

She grinned at me. She was a darn smart cookie, my little Nancy. “I got one of those old-time dolls that you hold on your lap and make talk.” She paused for a few seconds. “You know, now that I think about it, maybe me and Mason could work together on a show for everyone. Maybe even enter a talent show together or something.”

“You got a ventriloquist’s doll?” I tried really hard to keep my voice level and even. But it was hard. Those things had always creeped me out. Thing is, Sapphire knew that too. I’d be having a few words with my sister over this.

“Yup. Her name is Sassy, and she’s really cool.”

I swallowed and tried to look casual as I glanced around her room. “And where is Sassy now?”

Nancy giggled. “Sapphire said you’d be like this. She made sure I brought her over in her very own case.” She paused, then added with feeling, “Her very own case that locks.”

Part of me hated it, but I had to ask. “And is the case locked now?”

She giggled again and nodded. “Yup.” Then she pulled a tiny key on a chain out from under her pajama top. “She’s not going anywhere

without me. I promise."

I bent down and kissed her, told her goodnight, and then left her room.

Sue me, but I'd be back before I went to bed. And I'd be putting something very heavy on the top of that creepy as heck case.

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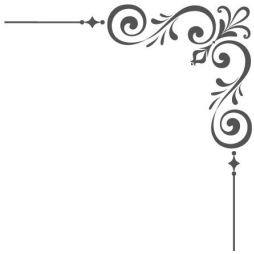

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Chapter 11

Well, we all survived the night. Little Sassy, who I had yet to be formally introduced to, didn't end up getting out of her box and going Chucky on all of us. Not yet, anyway.

I might be looking for a spell to ease my mind on the whole Sassy thing. But right now, there were more important things to take care of.

The first was a call to the sheriff.

"Hey, Opal, I was just about to ring you." He sounded tired. I had to wonder if he'd managed to get any sleep last night at all.

"I was wondering how the whole crime scene thing would work for opening the shop today."

"Yeah, about that. You've got a couple of options there. My preference is option number one. Take an extended weekend off and enjoy your family. Today is Friday, so it won't mean all that much downtime for the shop, and it will give my people all the time they need to process the scene and gather evidence."

He stopped there, obviously hoping that I'd just say yes to that and be done with it. He knew me better than that.

"And the second option?" Sorry, but I like to know all my options up front. Even if I most likely would take the first one as it would probably make things easier for Orville and his people.

"Technically, only the back part of the shop is the crime scene. I'm afraid that part of the shop will be off-limits. Even to you and Kimberly. You two could open the front shop, if you feel it is absolutely necessary to conduct business today. But you'll need to bring that power-lifter diaper bag with you packed with everything you need for Pearl to last the full day."

Didn't sound like all that much fun to me. We'd set the back room up that way for a reason. With it closed off, it would make our lives quite a bit harder. And, as the stairs to the upstairs were in the back, we couldn't even use the extra room up there for the larger kids either.

"Looks like we'll be having some time off, then, doesn't it?"

"I was kind of hoping you'd see it that way. I'll do my best to have it all opened back up to you by Monday." He paused. "I can try to get someone in to clean up for you if you like."

“Let me think on that first. Right now, I'm thinking that’s something I need to do myself.” Now it was my turn to pause. “I can trust those people of yours, right?”

He grunted. “They wouldn’t be my people if you couldn’t. Anything else you need before I get to bed for a few hours?”

As I’d suspected, the poor man must be dead on his feet. “Nothing at all, sheriff. And if there’s anything you need, like say any questions you and yours might have when going through that back room, you just let me know.”

“You’ll be my first call, I promise.”

“Goodnight, Orville.”

“Good Day, Opal.”

I stood there for a minute looking at the disconnected call message on the phone. Well, now how could I spend my time today?

Ha. Like I was wondering about that. I knew exactly how I’d be spending my time. And it would all start with finishing those journals. Then I’d see where that took me.

Because here’s the thing: Vince Riley wasn’t the kind to take the initiative to work for himself. No. Someone had hired him to break into my shop and make my life a living wreck. Although, to be honest, that last part most likely hadn’t been on their list of intentions. Not that it mattered one whit to me.

The fact was, they needed to pay. And I couldn’t really make them pay without knowing who they were.

Yes, I’d finagled a way to do a Karma spell on poor Vince. But he’d actually been in contact with the desk. Using the desk as a focal item for the spell most likely worked. Right now, I was only guessing, though, as I had no proof.

And as he hadn’t been successful in actually stealing anything from me, I couldn’t cast a spell linking to that item or use it as a focal point. I was dead in the water there.

“Opal, have you heard from the sheriff yet?” Kimberly was standing behind me in the kitchen doorway.

“Just got off the phone with him. It looks like we’ve got us a three-day weekend. Well, you and me and baby Pearl. Mason and Nancy will still have school.”

Kimberly raised an eyebrow, then glanced behind her. No sign of kids. “Do you need me for anything here today? There are a couple of things I’ve been needing to look into, and it would be easier to do that without a five-year-old.” She hesitated but stopped there. No worries, I could read between the lines.

“If you’re willing to see the older kids off to school, I’d be happy to take baby Pearl today. Give us a chance to bond a little, just the two of us.”

She looked relieved but unsure. “Are you sure you’d be okay with her today? I could probably take her with me.”

“I’m positive. In fact, the company would be kind of nice. And I think she and Bridget have a kind of love thing going on between them, they seem to fascinate each other.”

Kimberly smiled. “Pearl likes the bright feathers. And she loves it when Bridget goes into one of her birdy dances.”

I laughed. “And don’t think Bridget doesn’t know that, either. She dances a lot more when baby Pearl is around.” Of course, I couldn’t very well say that Bridget and the original Pearl had gotten along like gangbusters, too, now could I? Even if it was true. It was pretty obvious to me that my familiar could see the soul inside baby Pearl, and recognize it for what it was. Or rather, who it was.

“Well, if you’re sure…” she trailed off.

“Not asking where you’re out and about to, but is your car up to the challenge, or do you need to borrow mine?”

She shook her head. “Just a couple local runs, and the car’s been doing a lot better since Eddie did that tune-up.”

There wasn’t much more to be said after that, so she retreated up the stairs to fetch the older kids, and I followed along behind her to get baby Pearl. As usual, Nancy was just finishing up giving Pearl her morning bottle and had her draped over her shoulder ready for the big burp.

“I’ll take over with Pearl,” I said, reaching out for her. “You get ready for school. Kimberly will take you this morning.”

Heaven help me, but my eyes traveled across the room to that darn case. What had Sapphire been thinking?

Nancy saw my glance and giggled. “It really is just a doll, you know.” Then she hesitated. “Do you want to meet her?”

If it was only a doll, then why would she need to be introduced to me? Hmm? But I didn’t say that. I was too busy trying to stifle the shudder that threatened to take over my body. I know it’s an irrational fear, but everyone had at least one of them in their skull’s closet. Mine just happened to be ventriloquist’s dolls.

“Not at the moment, no. When you’ve showered and dressed, help yourself to some cereal. I don’t want you going off without eating something.”

As soon as the bathroom door closed behind her, I let the shudder loose. Baby Pearl let out a giggle of her own, and I looked down into her beautiful, soulful eyes. “Don’t you start too. You know how I am.” And most likely she knew why too. I said it was an irrational fear. I didn’t say there wasn’t a reason behind it.

ONCE THE TWO OLDER kids and Kimberly left, the house was a whole lot quieter. A person like me could think again. I smiled down at baby Pearl, all nestled into her harness on my chest. Happy as a lark with big, bright eyes shining back at me.

I don't know who came up with the whole idea of baby harnesses, but they were brilliant. It would have been nice if the invention had been around when I'd been raising Ruby. You could get things done and hold the baby at the same time. Who would have thought that would ever be possible?

We settled into my little apartment, and I pulled out the journals. I knew within reason that the sheriff would ask for them soon. It kind of surprised me he hadn't already. But then, the man knew me. He was probably counting on me reading them and saving him the time by just giving him the pertinent parts he needed to know.

That was fine with me. As long as I got to read them and not worry that they were sitting around just waiting to be read. For some reason, it seemed like there was a time crunch to all of this. I had no idea why it seemed that way. I mean, not to be disrespectful, but Malcolm could only die once. And poor Ashley too. So why did it seem to me that I needed to read these immediately?

My subconscious was trying to tell me something that I just wasn't getting. I trusted my subconscious. What some witches call their intuition. But that didn't mean I didn't wish it would be a little more direct in the telling.

There were other things I could be doing right now. Even if nothing really came to mind. I was used to my routine. It wasn't often an unexpected day off popped into my schedule.

Once I sat down, the harness was less interesting to baby Pearl, and she started wiggling around, wanting to be back moving again.

I pulled over her little bouncy chair and buckled her in. The swing was her favorite, but I didn't want her in it all day, every day. Besides, she liked the bouncy chair well enough, with its little hanging toys and bright colors.

There were two journals, and I will not lie and say that I read every single word of both of them. I didn't.

After a bit, they became more than a little boring. Malcolm was long-winded in his writing, to say the least.

The bottom line was, if his death had been anything other than the natural causes stated on his death certificate, Malcolm had never suspected a thing. The only thing Maude had been guilty of, in his opinion, was keeping him from living his full life in the last year.

According to his journals, Maude had feared for him to be in the public eye much with his failing health and had started basically keeping him a prisoner in his own home. Not that it wasn't a very nice

prison, with everything a man could ever ask for. But a kind of prison all the same.

I jotted down a few dates. It would be interesting to see just what had been going on in the world when that confinement had started. My guess was that it had been right around the time Ashley hit town. Maude wouldn't have wanted the two of them to meet. That was for certain.

That whole situation just didn't sit right with me. At all. That subconscious of mine was screaming to beat the band that something was there. Like it had to tell me that.

I already knew. Malcolm's death might have been natural causes. I'll give them that. He was an old man and had lived a full life.

Ashley Connor was a different story. A little digging there would definitely be in order.

Pushing the journals aside, I glanced down at baby Pearl. She was staring intently at Bridget. The bird wasn't dancing, but the two of them had eyes locked. It was enough to make me wonder if there was something more there. Probably just me being silly. Bridget had bright colors that would draw baby Pearl's attention, and Pearl was a baby and still a bit of a novelty to Bridget. Hence the mutual admiration and interest.

If only I believed that. That darn subconscious was at it again.

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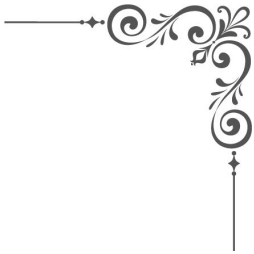

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Chapter 12

"So, Baby Pearl, are you up for a road trip?"

She didn't answer. If she had, it would have given me quite a start. But she did break her gaze from Bridget to look at me. I took that as a yes.

Of course, with a baby, it isn't as simple as just getting in the car and going. There was diaper changing, bottle feeding, and burping involved even before I packed a much smaller diaper bag for the trip and we headed for the car.

I was kind of glad that Kimberly hadn't taken me up on the offer of switching cars. The road between the farmhouse and the Golden Daze Bed and Breakfast was a curvy, windy one. Not that I'd be taking it at speeds that the good sheriff seemed capable of. But still, I felt much better having a reliable car to make the journey. Especially with the precious bundle in the back seat.

That is one thing I missed about the whole car seat thing. Not being able to have her right up front with me. They say it's safer in the back seat, but it's still a pain not being able to check on the baby as often as you would like. I don't know how people do it on long drives. It would drive me crazy. Hopefully, that would be a little better once she got old enough to have the car seat at least face toward the front. If only the people in charge would stop upping the age for that to happen.

I made double and triple sure she was in good, buckles were done properly, and that she had her little blanket snuggle toy. She loved that thing. Nancy had picked that one out. A little square of soft, silky material topped with a tiny stuffed dragon. Of course, I'm fairly sure dragons didn't really come in all the colors of the rainbow, but no one said it had to be realistic.

Besides, who knows? Maybe all dragons were rainbow-colored. I'd have to ask my supplier. One of these days I'd wear him down to let me actually see that darn dragon. Just wait.

The trip didn't take all that long. Not really. But it took me over the county line. I really hated that part.

There was just something about it. In Wind's Crossing, I felt safe and secure knowing that Sheriff Orville Taylor had my back. Well, he had my heart too, but that was a different matter.

Crossing over into another county meant I lost that secure feeling. Oh, I knew he would still come to me if need be. That, I never doubted for a single second. But the idea of being in some other law maker's territory always bothered me just a tiny bit.

You just never knew when you would run into a true witch hater. They were out there still. And sometimes they made it into law enforcement. When they did, the result wasn't so pretty for us Goddess-loving folks.

Not that I knew for a fact that was the case with the sheriff of this county. I didn't. But then I hadn't heard of many covens over here, either. Sometimes that could be a telltale sign all on its own.

On the drive, I started out to try and take note of all the places where poor Ashley's car might have gone off the road. Turns out, there were far too many to count. Country roads were like that, and this road had its twists and turns in spades. Didn't help that it was probably the hilliest part of Michigan, either.

My main wonder was whether the accident had happened in Wind's Crossing or beyond. And whether or not the resulting investigation had been handled by a man I trusted or a total stranger. Made a huge difference, and Orville had pointedly not said either way.

When we finally pulled up in front of the Golden Daze, I had to admit it impressed me. I'd been expecting some fancy, older mansion redone into a place to rent rooms for travelers. I guess I'd been expecting the place to have put on illusions of grandeur.

The house in front of me didn't. In fact, it was nice. If I didn't love my farmhouse with every fiber of my being, I could totally see myself living here.

It only had the one story. Unless, of course, there was a basement tucked away underneath. But that one story did a lot. It went on and back for quite a ways. And all the way around it that I could see from the drive, was a wide covered porch. Plenty of places to sit too.

The yard was landscaped plain and simple, and an old oak tree off to the side even had an old tire hanging from it for any kids to enjoy. I have to admit, it looked tempting, even to me. Might have to invest in one of those for out back. Mason and Nancy would like that. Probably better plan on two.

I stepped out of the car and went around the back to get baby Pearl out. A little girl came running over, dark curls bouncing, as soon as she saw the baby.

"Hi! Are you staying with us? Is your baby friendly? Can I hold her?"

I smiled down at the girl. "No, I'm just here to visit for a bit. Yes, the baby is friendly. And if you want to hold her, we'll have to go

inside, and you'll have to sit down."

She grinned up at me. "Okay." Then she turned and started running for the house. "Callie! We have company! And she has a baby!"

By the time we made it to the front door, the door was standing wide and a woman a little older than me stood in the threshold. She was tall, slender, and her hair looked just a bit on the windswept side.

All in all, she looked like someone I could get along well with. My instincts—or self-conscious, whatever you want to call it— is usually right about these things.

"She says I can hold the baby if I sit down. Can I, Callie? Please?"

The woman, Callie I assumed, smiled at me and shook her head. "She just got into the age of really enjoying her baby dolls. I'm afraid the idea of a real one has her a tad excited."

"Baby Pearl is worth getting excited about. I hope it's okay that I offered to let her hold her."

"Okay by me if it is with you. We'll watch her all the same, of course."

I didn't say anything to that. I mean, that went without saying. The girl couldn't have been over four years old. She'd be sitting within reach of me for sure.

"Before we get that far, I should introduce myself. I'm Callie Brown, owner of the Golden Daze, and this excited little baby-lover is Tory."

"That's short for Victoria," the little girl said, sounding the name out carefully.

"Well, that's a right fine name. I like it."

She grinned up at me. "Thanks! What's your name?"

"My name is Opal Ravenswind."

I hadn't expected my name to cause a stir, but it did. Callie had been holding a small metal watering can, and at the mention of my name, the can clattered onto the floor. Luckily it wasn't totally full of water, but there was still enough to spill out on the beautiful hardwood floor.

"Oh my, we'd better get that cleaned up before it stains your floor."

Callie just continued to stare at me for a second or two, then finally she nodded. "Tory, would you please go get me a towel from the guest bathroom?"

Once Tory had darted off, I stared the woman straight in the eyes. "Something tells me that you've heard of me."

She swallowed and nodded. "You're not at all what I had pictured, though."

Well, yes. Most people don't imagine witches carrying a baby and

a full diaper bag. A bag that was quickly growing heavy even with the reduction in stuff. And baby Pearl's car seat wasn't exactly lightweight, either.

"Is there a problem with who I am?"

Callie swallowed again. "That depends on why you're here, doesn't it? And I don't know that yet, now do I?"

"Well, I'm not here to hex you or the house, so you can set your mind at ease on that point. I'm just here to talk a bit. I'd like to hear about your old friend Maggie."

Callie's eyes went involuntarily to the side where little Tory had run, then back to me. "I'll set you up in the parlor and then join you once I clean up this mess."

She led the way into a bright, sun-filled room to the right. It was gorgeous. An open room with comfy sofas, a fireplace with a warm blaze roaring, and plenty of light streaming through the huge picture windows lining the front wall.

I settled on one of the sofas and then looked back to the woman. "Is it okay if I change baby Pearl here?"

She nodded. "Of course. Do whatever you need to do for her." She glanced nervously behind her.

Something about my being there was bothering her. I was hoping she wouldn't let that interfere with Tory holding Pearl. I didn't want the child disappointed just because of who I was.

I was also really hoping that Callie wasn't one of those witch-haters I'd been so recently thinking about. It was possible that she was just nervous because she didn't know how to act around one. If that was the case, no problem. She'd see within minutes that I was just another person. We probably had a lot in common, if she'd let loose enough to be able to see it.

By the time she came back, I had baby Pearl all changed and back in her car seat. It doubled as a travel chair in times like this.

I was glad to see that Tory followed right behind her. The little girl's eyes were focused on Pearl in the car seat.

I patted the sofa beside me. "Come sit here, Tory, and I'll get baby Pearl for you."

Tory dove onto the couch and then sat stiff as a board, ready for her golden opportunity to hold a real-life baby doll. She probably wouldn't have been nearly as excited about the prospect if she'd come in the room a few minutes earlier. Baby Pearl could fill a diaper better than any baby I'd ever seen.

It didn't take long to get her settled. Once she was holding Pearl and talking to her, Callie finally relaxed enough to sit down herself. After she'd pulled a chair a little closer to the sofa, that is.

I was trying to figure out the relationship between Callie and Tory,

but I just couldn't put my finger on it. There was no family resemblance that I could see. But then, sometimes that happened. What they called the milkman's baby syndrome.

"So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?" Her voice was friendly enough, if a little on the uptight side.

"I understand that you had a friend named Maggie years ago. And that her daughter, Ashley, stayed with you here a year or so ago. Is that right?"

She nodded but said nothing. This could take a while.

"Can I ask how you knew Maggie? And a little about her? I'm afraid I only know her first name."

Callie took a deep breath before saying anything. "Her full name was Maggie Connor. She was a friend of mine from all the way back in grade school. We were close." A faint smile touched her lips. "I think they call it BFFs these days. We were pretty inseparable for a while."

"But that changed?"

Her smile faded, and she turned away. "Maggie got pregnant out of wedlock. Nowadays that isn't anything, but back in our day..."

"It was."

She nodded. "Yeah, it was. Especially when the father refused to come forward and do the right thing."

Kind of hard for a married man to do the right thing when doing the wrong thing had brought new life into the world. But I couldn't really say that, could I? Privileged information.

"What happened?"

Callie shrugged. "She moved away. We kept up for a while, letters and the occasional phone call. Eventually, though, we drifted apart."

"She died, didn't she?"

"Yes. A little over a year ago, actually."

"Did Ashley's visit have anything to do with that?"

She sat up straighter. "Maybe. It's possible that the girl just wanted to get away for a while to get her head on straight. She'd cared for her mother through a long bout of cancer." Callie looked a little proud. "Ashley was a nurse. A darned good one too. She didn't deserve what happened to her."

"I heard that she drove off the road coming back here from Wind's Crossing. I'm very sorry about that."

Glaring eyes met mine. "She didn't drive off that road. And she wasn't drunk, either. Ashley didn't do those kinds of things."

"Then what do you think happened?'

"I think she was murdered."

See, just like I thought. We did have something in common.

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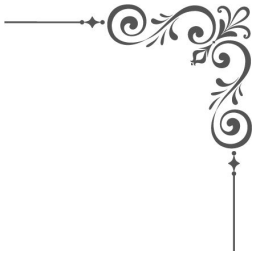

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Chapter 13

I noticed she was looking at me rather strangely.

"That didn't seem to surprise you. I'm wondering why."

I reached over and rearranged baby Pearl a bit on Tory's lap before answering. When I did, my voice was low. "That's because I've been kind of thinking the same thing."

Her eyebrows arched upward. "Truly? Because everyone else seems to think I'm obsessed with the whole thing. Not that my obsession has ever gotten one single bit of resulting action. The whole world except for us seems to be ready to believe the worst of Ashley. But then, they didn't know her, did they?"

"I didn't know her either, but I find the timing extremely odd for it to have been an accident. But I suppose it is possible that she was upset and simply missed a curve?"

Callie shook her head fervently. "No. Not Ashley. She was killed. I'm sure of it." She hesitated. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume you know why she was in town?"

"Pretty sure she was here to meet her father."

Callie nodded. "And I take it you have an idea who that is?"

"I'm thinking Malcolm Fontaine."

She took a deep breath. "You're thinking right. Maggie was working as a maid for the Fontaines when she became with child. She never told me he was the father, but I had my suspicions."

"How did Ashley find out?"

Callie looked away. "On her deathbed, Maggie weakened and told her. Had her pen a letter to her father and everything. She couldn't bear the idea of leaving Ashley alone in the world without someone to look after her." She grunted. "Like Malcolm would have been up to that job."

"Did he turn her away?" I knew the answer to that from the journals, but I wanted to know how she thought things had gone down.

"No. He didn't even care enough to meet her. Even after Maggie's letter, he refused to see her. Not that I expected any different from the man. He always was a greedy old turd. Probably afraid she was out to claim an inheritance or something." Her watery eyes were back on mine. "That wasn't why she was here, you know, money. She truly

just wanted to know her dad. Sad she never even got to do that."

"What if Malcolm never got that letter?" I was pretty positive that if he'd gotten a letter from the lost love of his life he would have at least mentioned it in his nightly journal round. He hadn't.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you suggesting that he didn't know she came to town?"

I thought for a minute before nodding. "I'm not saying that's what happened. But I think Malcolm felt bad for how things went with Maggie. I think, there at the end, he wanted to make it right." And the telltale sign of all was the fact that he hadn't even known of Ashley's death. They had even kept that from him.

Callie looked down at her hands. "I'd never thought about that possibility. I guess I've spent so many years hating the man for sending my best friend away from me that it never even occurred to me he might have been kept from her."

She paused, and I kept my mouth shut. She wasn't finished yet, and I wanted to know what else she had to say. It took a few minutes.

"He really didn't have anything to lose that late in life, did he?" she asked, her voice sounding more as if she were talking to herself than to me. "And it would make sense that as the end drew near, he would try to make amends. Old turds do that sort of thing. Try to make things right at the end when it really doesn't matter anymore."

Tory grunted, drawing my attention down to her. "Are you getting tired, dear?"

She nodded. "My arm is tired a little. But Pearl is really cool. Will you come back again when she's bigger so we can play together?" There was a lot of hope in that tiny little voice.

I looked over at Callie.

"I'm afraid there aren't many children her age around here for her to play with. Most of our guests are adults and business travelers. It's seldom we get a couple with kids. Shame, really."

I smiled down at Tory. "Well, baby Pearl has an older brother pretty close to your age, and a kind of sister a little older. I think they'd love to have you over to the farmhouse for a play date, if that's okay with Callie."

Callie didn't seem too sure about the idea. "Let me think on that. I mean, we have only just met, Opal Ravenswind."

"Point taken." I hesitated. "Maybe I'll bring the whole lot of us over here sometime. Rent a couple of rooms and let the kids get to know each other first. Would that be better?"

She smiled. "Now that sounds lovely."

Good. Every child needed playmates.

Even little heiresses. Because I was fairly certain that little Victoria was really Victoria Connor Fontaine.

I was also sure that for some reason, Callie didn't want anyone else to know that. Made me wonder why that was.

And when I wanted to know something, I generally found a way to do so.

WE SAID OUR GOODBYES, and I promised to call soon to make that reservation. I'd have made it right then to show her I was serious about it, but I needed to check with Kimberly first. After all, better than half the kids involved in the arrangement were hers. Kind of important to let her in on the plans before setting them in stone.

The plan was forming in my head, even as I pulled out of the Golden Daze's driveway. The first thing I needed to know was whether or not Ashley's accident had truly been an accident. There were a lot of places I could go to try to reason that out, but I might as well start with the main question I wanted answered.

If the accident had been on the Wind's Crossing side of things, I could put my mind more at ease. I know Orville doesn't take his job lightly. If he said it was an accident, then I'd go with that. As long as he gave me his word he checked into all angles of the thing. Which, knowing Orville, wouldn't be an issue. So, to save myself time and effort, I rang him.

"Hey, Opal. Everything cool?"

I didn't make a habit of bothering him at work, so he had good reason to ask. "Everything's fine, Orville. I just had a quick question for you. That accident where Ashley Connor died. Was that in Wind's Crossing, or the next county over?"

There was a brief moment of silence from his end of the phone. "Why do I suspect that is anything but a quick question, Opal?" Another pause. "Did you find something in that journal that I should know about?"

I grunted. "You answer my question, and then maybe I'll answer yours, sheriff."

A long drawn out breath came through the phone. "Fine. No, the accident wasn't in my jurisdiction. So no, more to the point, I wasn't the investigating officer on the scene."

That's what I'd been afraid of. But a promise was a promise. "Well, it was a quick question, you have to give me that. But yes, the reason behind it might not be so quick to answer. I'm really starting to wonder if that was a simple drunk driving accident. I've just finished speaking to someone who feels very strongly that it wasn't."

"And the journals?"

"Nothing concrete. But the one thing they don't mention is getting a visit from Ashley. I'm thinking they hid her visit from Malcolm. And

if Maude would hide her visit... well, would she be willing to take things a step further and take care of the problem once and for all?"

"You're talking a pretty drastic step there, Opal."

"I am. But we're also talking about a pretty drastic amount of money too."

"Granted."

"So, I'm thinking maybe it all boils down to just how much you trust the investigating sheriff. Is he as good as you are?" I already knew the answer to that one. No one was as good as he was. He knew that, too, even if he didn't like to admit it.

The silence was longer this time. In a way, that gave me the answer I was looking for right there.

"Let's just say that Sheriff Menard and I have different ways of doing things and leave it at that."

Huh. Like that was gonna happen. "Do you think he gave the accident a fair investigation?"

That darn silence again. I was getting a real bad feeling about this.

"Look, Opal, I've already got to worry about one Ravenswind out doing investigations that should be left to the law. I don't need another one. Especially if that one is you."

"You know you kind of answered my question, right?"

"Yeah. I never could lie to you. Even when I really, really want to."

"That's a good thing, Sheriff Orville Taylor. Truth is a mighty important quality in a man, you know. A woman too, for that matter."

"Would it make you feel better if I called over to Menard's office and asked a few questions?"

I thought about it. "Not really. If he didn't investigate the accident when it happened, why would he start now?" In fact, it might be decidedly better to keep him entirely out of the loop. I didn't want to have to worry about the man doing something to cover his tracks. Like hiding evidence or something.

"Well, say the word, and I'll make the call. It's legally out of my jurisdiction, so there isn't much else I can help you with, I'm afraid. We'll have to rely on what they covered in the newspapers. And that's a risky proposition at the best of times."

"Still don't seem right to leave it as an accident without looking into it, though, does it? Not with what we know now, anyway."

"I'll give you that. But if you start asking questions, Opal, please tone them down and be nice. I don't want to walk into your shop someday and see you on the floor. I just don't think I could take it. And if this is all tied together, like you think it is..."

"I'll be careful, Orville. I give you my word as a Ravenswind."

"Actually, it's that Ravenswind part of things that keeps me worried most of the time. Why, oh why, couldn't I have fallen in love

with an ordinary, everyday kind of woman? No, I had to fall for the High Priestess of the Gemstone Coven."

Now the silence came from my end. We'd never actually came right out and said the whole "L" word before. That was big.

"Uh-oh. Did I mess up the order of things somehow? I kind of figured by now you'd know the state of my feelings toward you." He hesitated. "But don't feel like you have to say it back. I didn't mean to put that kind of pressure on you. I'm okay with the way things are... for now."

That for now kind of had me worried. Things were the way they were for a very good reason. I couldn't see that reason changing anytime soon.

"But while I have you on the phone, I do have one other, very important thing to tell you. And a follow-up question to ask."

I swallowed. I was starting to think maybe calling him hadn't been such a great idea. "Oh?"

"Yes. I just heard from the coroner's office. Vince died of massive blunt force trauma. At least the ax wasn't involved as far as we can tell. And I'm pretty sure that would be easy enough for the coroner to figure out."

"And?"

"And while examining the body, the coroner noted that the man had the worst case of hemorrhoids he'd ever seen. Said they were so bad, they'd probably put pictures of them in a medical journal." He paused ever so slightly. "Don't suppose there might be something you'd want to tell me right about now?"

"Well, let's just say a High Priestess of the Gemstone Coven has to look after her reputation and leave it at that."

"Kind of thought that would be your answer." A chuckle came over the phone. "I take it you've gotten a bit more specific on your Karma spells?"

"It seemed prudent after the whole Valerie thing."

"Yeah, good call. As bad as they were, I've never known hemorrhoids to kill a man. Take care, Opal."

And while I was still debating whether to end the call with declaring my love for him, too, he hung up. Probably just as well.

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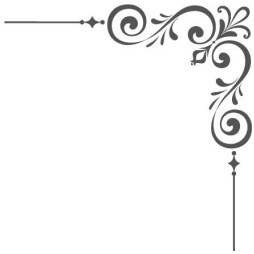

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Chapter 14

There was one stop I desperately wanted to make on the way home. Unfortunately, it wasn't the kind of stop one could really do with a baby in hand. So, home it was. I'd have to double back. Might not be the most efficient use of time, but it was what it was.

By the time we pulled up at the farmhouse, Kimberly's car was already parked out back, and I could hear Mason and Nancy playing up on the second-floor balcony. I knew they needed some time outdoors, even in the winter, but I didn't want them to come down with colds, either.

"Hey you two, don't stay out too long, you hear me?" I called up to them.

Nancy's face popped over the banister railing. "We won't. Five more minutes and we'll be in, promise."

I'll admit it made me wonder what they were doing up there. I trusted Nancy, but a ten-year-old witch could get herself into a lot of trouble pretty darn quickly. Nancy might not be an elemental, but then again, she just might. There was power in that girl. I just hadn't quite figured out her focus yet. I was rather hesitant to help such a young witch figure something like that out. It was kind of like pouring gasoline on a fire.

Ten years old was far too young for a blazing flame. I was speaking from experience here. My younger self had been far too impatient to receive my magical inheritance. It had caused my mother, Goddess love her, a whole lot of grief. Not something I wanted a repeat of. Especially as I'd now be wearing my mother's shoes.

I dropped baby Pearl off with Kimberly and went up to check on them. It wasn't like me to do that, but my current train of thoughts had me a little concerned.

I shouldn't have been. Yes, the kids were playing with magic, but not the real kind. They were testing out a trick from the old magic kit. Made sense that they were doing it outside when I got close enough to get a whiff.

"What the devil is that stuff?"

"Mostly vinegar, but I think maybe it got a little old," Mason said, waving his hand in front of his nose.

Nancy blushed. "Sorry, Auntie. I should have known better than to

open such an old bottle inside. We're trying to air it out." She ducked her head. "Sorry about letting out the heat."

I grunted. "Better to let out a little heat, if it takes the smell with it." I glanced around. "Did you put the cap back on the bottle?"

She nodded. "As fast as I could. But when that smell hit me, I kinda freaked out and spilled a little."

"Well, don't freeze your bums out here. Come on back inside. Leave the doors and windows open for a bit, and you can both play in Mason's room, or come downstairs until it clears out. Give it a little time, then you'll need to scrub out the spot you spilled it on. I'd say best to use some of the special cleaner I keep in my cupboard for that." That stuff could take out the worst of smells. "Just don't use too much of it. A tablespoon full on a sponge should do the trick."

With the kids taken care of, I made my way thankfully back down into the warm, clean-smelling air of downstairs. I pulled the door shut to Kimberly's apartment as I passed. No sense in stinking up her place, too.

"What have the kids gotten into now?"

I laughed. "Let's just say bottles in old magic kits are best left unopened. You might not want to go upstairs for a bit."

She nodded. "I thought I caught a whiff of something foul."

I shrugged. "These things happen. Can't really blame the kids for this one."

Kimberly smiled at me. "You're a much more relaxed person than I ever would have thought, Opal Ravenswind."

"Just don't go telling people that, okay? I kind of like my reputation of being a hard-nosed witch."

"Your secret is safe with me."

"Did you have a chance to get your running done?"

"Yup. Things are now in the works. I'm not ready to talk about it yet, though." She hesitated. "I hope that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all. When you are willing and wanting to talk, Goddess willing, I'll still be here to talk to." I glanced over at baby Pearl sitting happily in her swing. "Would you mind keeping an eye on things here while I make another run of my own? Shouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours. And I'd be willing to spring for dinner delivery, so you wouldn't even have to cook."

"Well, this is turning out to be a good day all around then. I'll man the fort here. You do what you need to do." She leaned over closer to me and sniffed. "But you might want to change clothes before you go."

She wasn't wrong.

I PULLED INTO THE SMALL tavern's parking lot. My timing was good. I'd managed to make it back up the hill before happy hour. It was a close call, though. I'd be wanting to get in and out as quick as I could. Bars just weren't my thing.

It's possible that Ashley had visited the much nicer tavern in the main town, but somehow I was betting this was where she had stopped. It helped that it was right at the halfway point between Wind's Crossing proper and the Golden Daze. To my mind, that would make it the perfect spot to stop and try to clear one's head before heading to your temporary home away from home.

I'd know soon enough if my thinking was right.

The back wall by the door was filled with hooks to hang your coat on. Only a few of them were taken. Not that I had to use that as a way to judge the crowd. There were only two people sitting at the bar, and one man and woman sitting at a table eating.

I have to admit the food smelled amazing. Maybe I was missing out on not frequenting places like this. I could go for a dinner plate sized tenderloin and onion rings right about now. And was that... a fried veggie platter? Oh, I was so ordering one of those!

I hesitated for a moment. It would be easier to just take a seat at a table and have the waitress come to me. But the one I really wanted to talk to was the bartender. At least for starters. Besides, I didn't want to give them the idea that I'd be sticking around to eat here. I definitely wanted my food to go.

The stools were high, but I perched myself on one as daintily as I could. The bartender, a young bearded man with tattoos from shoulders to fingertips, grinned at me.

"How can I help you, Ma'am?" It wasn't hard to hear the laughter at the back of his voice.

"How does one go about ordering around here? I'd love a takeout of two of your tenderloins and two of the fried veggie baskets." I'd have to remember to call Kimberly and stop her from adding our dinners to the delivery order. Although, most likely, she'd be ordering pizza, and it never hurt to have leftover pizza in the fridge. Somehow, it never lasted for more than a day with kids in the house.

"I can help you with that." He jotted something down on an order pad and handed it off to a waitress. "Now what can I do about your thirst?"

The devil in me wanted to do something outrageous. Like order one of those ultra-naughty sounding drinks. I knew the names of them from reading. Unfortunately, what I didn't know was what was in the darn things. My luck it would be Tequila or something hard like that. And I had the drive home to think of.

"Plain coke would be fine."

“Color me surprised,” he said, grinning to take the sting out. “I hope you don’t mind, but you don’t come into places like this much, do you?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “And you don’t get tipped much, do you?”

“Ouch.” His grin never faltered though. “I deserved that. But you have to admit, you don’t exactly look like our normal clientele, right?”

I glanced around. Jeans, tee-shirts, and flannel shirts all over the place. Well, except for the bartender, who chose to show off his muscular tatted arms in a tank top. Working at a bar must be hot work. Then I glanced down at my simple black dress with a gold cinched belt, covered with a simple, but I like to think stylish, gray overcoat. I’d chosen to keep the coat with me for a speedier exit. That was before I had smelled the food.

“I suppose you do have a point there.”

He nodded to the back wall. “You can hang your coat if you like. The food will take a bit.”

I drew the coat closer to me. “I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

He shrugged, then popped the top on a clear glass bottle of Coke and handed it to me. “Here you go. If there’s anything else you need, just say the word. My name is Gray, by the way.”

His smile was starting to be a tad infectious. I found myself smiling back. “Thank you, Gray. My name is Opal. Nice to meet you.”

One hand flew to his chest, and he staggered back a foot in mock shock. “It can’t be! Please tell me you’re the infamous Opal Ravenswind I’ve been hearing so much about, and you will make my entire year!”

My smile turned a little crooked. “Don’t you mean to say famous rather than infamous?”

He just grinned at me and leaned in. “My words stand.” His voice lowered, and he glanced around us. No one was paying us or our conversation much mind. Or at least they were trying very hard to make it seem that way, anyway. “Are you really that Opal?”

I straightened the tiniest bit on the stool. Not that I’m in the habit of slouching, mind you. “I am. And I’d be interested in hearing exactly what it is you’ve heard about me, but I have a few questions for you first, if you don’t mind.”

Gray stood back up and wiped the bar in front of me to give him an excuse to still be standing there. “Shoot away, I’m a pretty open guy.”

“How long have you been working here?”

He thought for a minute. “About a year and a half now. Started out as a cook, if you can believe it. Turns out, I have a better gift at tending bar.”

“I can see that.” I hesitated. “Were you working the bar last spring? Well, late winter actually. Around the first of March?”

His eyes narrowed, getting a knowing look to them. Once more he leaned in, this time lowering his voice even more. I’d chosen the end stool for more than just one reason. It should be hard for the other patrons to hear us as long as we kept it down. The jukebox music would cover us pretty well.

“Is this about that Connor woman?”

I tilted my head at him. “You’ve got a good brain in that head of yours, Gray. It is, indeed. Were you working that night?”

He nodded, and for the first time, his smile slipped. “I was.” He glanced nervously behind him. “And I read the papers the next morning too. The headline about her being drunk and driving? She sure as shootin’ wasn’t drunk when she left here. She had one drink. One, and she ate an order of fries while she drank it too. She was stone-cold sober when she left. I’d swear to it.”

“I’m going to read between the lines here and say you don’t think her driving off the road was an accident?”

Gray glanced behind him again. Then he pulled off a sheet from the order book and scribbled something on the back of it before handing it to me. “I’ve said all I have to say.” Then he whispered. “Here.”

The paper had a phone number on it, and I could take a hint. I didn’t protest when he moved down the bar to tend to the other folk. The place started filling in with people, and as soon as my food came out, I paid my bill and left.

Gray got a pretty darn good tip too.

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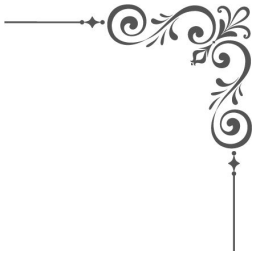

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Chapter 15

The next morning was Saturday and, with the shop being closed, a good morning to sleep in for a change. Unfortunately, the sheriff had other ideas. My phone rang at seven-thirty.

"Please don't be calling to tell me there's more damage at my shop. Or another body." I paused a split second. "Actually, if I have a choice, I'd take the damage over the body."

He barked out a laugh. "Neither. No damage. No body. In fact, I was calling to see if you might come by this morning and do a quick inventory for us. So far, we've been convinced that this whole thing is just desk related, but I want to make sure that whoever knocked poor old Vince out of the realm of the living didn't help themselves to something from your shop on their way out. Murderers can't really be considered as honest people, you know."

I hadn't thought of that. "I can be there in around an hour. Would that work?"

"Did I wake you up?" His voice had a tinge of startlement to it.

"I do sleep in occasionally, you know. It's been a rough week, all things considered."

"Oh, I agree. And I feel bad disturbing your beauty sleep." I waited, but he didn't elaborate on that last statement. Smart man.

"See you in an hour, Orville." And for just this once, I hung up first.

A short shower and drive later, and I was sitting outside the shop. I was early, but Orville's sheriff cruiser was already parked on the street. I pulled my car in behind his and got out. He wasn't in his vehicle, so I walked on into the shop. He was standing behind the counter looking slightly puzzled.

"Something wrong, sheriff?"

He hesitated but finally shook his head. "No. I just can't wrap my head around all this. I can understand wanting to get their hands on the will if they thought an unknown heir was going to rob them of their hard-earned inheritance. But if they knew about the will, then they most likely knew about Ashley. And that she was dead. So why break the law not once but three times to get a will that won't really end up hurting them at all?"

"Hmm. Hadn't really thought of that. Maybe they didn't know

what was in the will, after all. Maybe they just suspected? And maybe they didn't think Ashley would be the only late-coming heir?" I tried to be nonchalant about it, but right now the fact that he knew what that will said, and I didn't was really rankling me. "For instance. What if Ashley had a child? Would the money go to the child? Or back to the estate to be distributed to the other named heirs?"

Orville's eyes were bright on mine. "Are you saying Malcolm has a living grandchild?"

I stared at him for a minute. "Maybe if you answer my question, I'll answer yours. That's how these things usually work, you know."

It took him a while to answer. That was fine. I had the time. "Not a word of any of this gets out. To anyone, and I mean anyone. You agree?"

I nodded.

"Okay. I'll have to check with Archie. But the way the will read to me, if Ashley had a child, her part of the inheritance would go to them." He scrubbed at his chin. "And if that's the case, then maybe this all makes a bit more sense to me."

"Well, you did your part, I guess, so now I'll do mine. I don't have proof that Malcolm has a grandchild, but I have a mighty strong suspicion that is the case. If so, then that child will inherit what? A small fortune or something?"

"Something like that, yeah. Only not as small as you might think. Old Malcolm was trying hard to make things right by Ashley. Make up for lost time and all that."

I was quiet for a minute, thinking. Finally, I glanced around the shop. "This shop is firmly in your jurisdiction, isn't it, sheriff?"

He turned a puzzled brow to me. "You know the answer to that, Opal."

"Well, I was just thinking. If the investigation of the burglaries of this shop, not to mention the murder of old Riley, led you to the accident of one Ashley Conner Fontaine, then you would be within your rights to cross jurisdictional lines, wouldn't you?"

Orville stared at me in silence for a full minute before answering. "It's stretching things a bit, but yeah. I think I could work with that." He scrubbed his chin again. "I'm thinking you have somewhere to start in mind?"

"Well, I'm wondering what happened to that car Ashley was driving. It would have probably been a rental, right? I'm thinking maybe the rental place might be more likely to talk with you than with me."

Orville gave a grunt. "Seeing as how the local rental place is run by Vince Riley's brother, Brady, I'd say you're probably right on that one."

As if it was my fault Vince got himself killed while trying to rob my shop. Still, the Riley boys could hold grudges even when they weren't warranted. "You in?"

"I'm in. But first the inventory. We really do need to know if anything is missing. That wasn't just a lure to get you alone to myself, you know." He wiggled his eyebrows at me. "Although, it did work for that too, didn't it? And just so you know, this is my day off."

I hit him in the arm and grabbed the inventory books. Now wasn't the time to play. And I had to keep telling myself that too. Being alone with the sheriff, sometimes telling myself that wasn't as easy as it should have been.

I SAT IN THE CAR AT the rental shop. With the tinted windows of the sheriff's car, I figured I was okay to sit upright. Brady shouldn't be able to see me sitting there, even if he took the time to look out. With it being a Riley brother, he probably would. Shady people always seemed to have an eye out for their backs. With good reason too.

Orville was only in there for ten minutes. When he came out holding a sheet of paper, I took that as a good sign. A clue to follow up on.

I was right.

"Well, as we already knew, the vehicle was a total loss. But according to Riley in there, the metal remains of what used to be a Chevy Cavalier are now resting in the local junkyard." He handed me the slip of paper. "That's the sheet to show the yard boss which car we want to look at."

"Okay, so why are you acting funny? Sounds like you learned what you wanted to learn, right?"

"Yeah," Orville said slowly, looking back toward the rental office. "It's just that ole Brady was acting mighty strange when I first walked in. He seemed to calm down once I started asking about the accident. It just makes me worried as to what he might be up to."

"Hmm. Maybe he thought you were there to ask him about his brother, Vince, and why he was so adamant about breaking into that blasted desk."

Orville's head swiveled over in my direction in a heartbeat. "You think he might know something about that?"

I shrugged. "They are brothers. And when they were younger, they got into a lot of trouble together, didn't they? Maybe they still are. Or at least they were, I mean."

His face grew grim, and he put the car back in park. "I think I need to go back in for another little chat."

My hand on his arm stopped him. "It might be better to let him

think he's won just this once, sheriff. Besides, it's your day off, remember?"

He looked at me, then finally gave a small nod. "Maybe you're right." His eyes went back to the office trailer. The curtain in the window was peeped just enough for someone to look out at us. "Maybe I should let him stew for a bit longer. I'll be back."

I patted his hand. "I know you will. Now let's go see that car."

We both knew the junkyard in question. That was the easy part, as Wind's Crossing only had the one. Finding the car was the hard part. It wasn't nearly the easy job of handing a slip of paper to the yard boss that Riley had made it out to be.

The boss took a look at the sheet and shook his head slowly. "Yeah, I remember that car. Funny you should ask about it, 'cause someone just called on that very vehicle just yesterday."

"Did you happen to get the name of the caller?" Orville asked.

Another head shake. "Nope. But I had to tell them the same thing I'm about to tell you. That car don't exist anymore."

Orville and I spared a glance at each other.

"You made it into a big crushed tin can, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yup. The car had been here long enough, and I needed the room. Plus, we'd already stripped out anything salvageable from it." He grunted. "Not that there was all that much that was salvageable. The car was pretty much a goner from every angle."

Orville looked at me. "Well, I guess that's that, then."

The man scratched his head. "I can't show you the car itself, but would pictures work?"

"Pictures?"

"Yup. It might not look like it, but I run a pretty tight ship around here. I got a couple dozen photos of every vehicle out in the lot, inside and out. And I always take a video of the car before I crush it, too. For prosperity. Just feels right to do that for the vehicle. Kinda like a memorial showing or something."

"I'd be very interested in those photos, and that video too," Orville said.

The man disappeared into his back office and came out with a file folder filled with pictures. Then he walked over to a small wall cabinet and pulled out a single thumb drive.

"The file name of the video is the same as the number on that there sheet you brought." He glanced around his tiny little lobby—if you could really call it that. "Afraid there ain't much room for you to sit and take a peek at it here."

"Would you be willing for me to take this if I promised to return it once I'd made copies?"

The man scratched his head again and then nodded. "If'n you

cain't trust the sheriff, who can you trust?"

"Thank you," Orville said. "I'll get this back to you soon. Let me know if you need them before then." He paused. "And if that caller happens to call back, see if you can get their name this time."

"Will do, sheriff."

We walked back to the car in silence. I'm pretty sure we were both thinking the same exact thing. The fact that someone else was interested in the remains of that car told me one thing.

We were on the right track.

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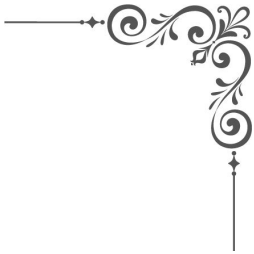

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Chapter 16

I reached for the folder just as soon as Orville laid it down to start the car. He smacked my hand lightly.

"Oh, no you don't. That's now state evidence as far as I'm concerned. And as such, there is a very strict chain of custody procedure. No one touches that until I have the chance to go through it inch by inch."

I glared at him. "And that applies to me, Orville Taylor? Me? The one who suggested starting this chain of investigation in the first place?"

He chuckled and nodded. "Even you, Opal. I know you might not understand, but I really do take my job very seriously. If I have to go up on a stand in a court of law on this and state that no one had access to that file between the time I received it and the time I reviewed it... well, I'm not the kind to perjure myself, now am I?"

I folded my arms across my chest and looked out the side window. I could understand what the sheriff was saying, but that didn't mean I had to be happy about it. Besides, I thought it was really just his way of keeping me from getting too involved in the case.

Yeah, like that would happen. I got involved the first time Vince Riley broke into my shop. And I'd dang well stay involved until this thing was put to bed. I might not have known Malcolm all that well, or Ashley at all, but they deserved justice all the same.

Not that I didn't trust Orville to bring that to them. Still, a little help from me couldn't hurt things, now could it?

He dropped me back off at the shop and watched until I got into my car and pulled away from the curb. The man wasn't taking any chances. Like I was going to go in and disturb the crime scene or something. And like he could really stop me, if that was something I wanted to do. I had the keys, dang it all. Not to mention the tiny little fact that I owned the place.

Not my fault Vince went and got himself killed there.

I was still fuming a bit when I pulled up in front of the farmhouse. It kind of startled me when I'd barely made it out of the car and Kimberly popped out the front door. Like she'd been watching for me or something.

Hopefully, that didn't mean unpleasant news. Then I noticed the

motorcycle sitting by the tree at the corner of the porch. Where the heck did that thing come from?

I walked slowly up the steps and onto the porch, my eyes and mind still on that cycle just sitting there.

Who in their right mind would ride a motorcycle in February in Michigan?

Kimberly was fairly bouncing on her heels by the time I was standing in front of her.

"There's a good-looking hunk of a man here to see you, Opal."

I frowned at her. "There is?" Then I thought of the motorcycle, and my mind went back to last night's visit to the bar. "He wouldn't happen to have a beard and a whole lot of tattoos, would he?"

"That's him, all right. His name is Gray." Her voice dropped, even though she'd shut the door behind her when she stepped out onto the porch. "Where on earth did you find him? And please, oh please tell me he's single."

Oh, so that's how things were.

"Sorry, don't have a clue as to his marital status. But as to where I found him—he's the barkeep at that tavern on the way out toward the Golden Daze."

Her eyes went to the house behind her. "I'll have to go there, then, won't I?"

"What's he doing now?" I was really kind of wondering why she'd just left a strange man in the house to come out to meet me. Especially seeing as how the kids were inside that house too.

She giggled. "Would you believe he's teaching Mason a magic trick? One that uses cards. Those two are hitting it off like gangbusters."

Ah, so my eyes were opening a little further now. Good looking... good with kids... seems that Gray had a lot more going for him than just his easygoing smile and personality.

Not that I was at all sure he was good enough for Kimberly. Only time would tell that. There were questions to be answered first.

We walked in and, sure enough, there was Mason sitting on the floor with a deck of cards. When he saw me, his eyes lit up, and he ran up to me, with the cards fanned out in both of his little hands.

"Pick a card, Aunt Opal! Any card at all."

I could have ignored him. I could have told him that I had company waiting. I could have done either or both of those of things, but I didn't. I picked a bloody card and hoped that I didn't ruin the trick for him.

He closed his eyes, put the cards behind his back for a few seconds, then brought them forward again. "Now put it back in the deck. Anywhere at all."

I did.

He took the cards to the coffee table and fanned them out in front of him. After a minute of intent staring, he laughed and reached down and picked up a card. Then he held it out to me. “The Queen of Hearts!” There was more than a little victory in that little voice of his.

And I had to admit, I was highly impressed. That was, indeed, my card. “How on earth did you do that?”

Mason shook his head. “A true magician never tells how they do it, Aunt Opal.”

I ruffled his hair. “Sorry, Mason. You’re absolutely right. Now why don’t you and Nancy go upstairs so that Aunt Opal can talk with her visitor.”

He wanted to argue. I could see that in his eyes. But little Mason had been raised right. He walked over to Gray first, though.

“Thanks for teaching me that trick! I hope you come again. Any time at all!” Then he paused. “Well, after I get home from school would be best.” He hesitated, then threw his arms briefly around Gray and ran upstairs.

Gray nodded after him. “That’s a mighty fine boy you’ve got there.”

I felt, rather than saw, Kimberley stand a little taller beside me. “That he is,” she said.

“And all thanks to a good mother.” I paused. “I take it you two have already introduced yourselves, right?”

Gray nodded again, blushing slightly. “Yup.”

I raised my eyebrow at the color in his cheeks. It seems that maybe the attraction Kimberley was feeling towards him went both ways. I definitely had some research in my future. Better yet, I’d just hire Amie, my wannabe investigator, to check him out and save my valuable time.

“So what brings you here today, Gray?”

He looked down at his hands. “That accident that killed Ashley Conner. It’s never sat right with me, that. Sounded to me like maybe it didn’t sit quite right with you either.”

“Well, you’re right there. It doesn’t sit well with me at all.” I hesitated. “But I’d like to hear your story first if you don’t mind.”

He gave me a sad smile. “That’s why I’m here.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “Last March, I got to know Ashley a little. Not as well as what I wanted to, mind you. Turns out we didn’t have time for that.” He glanced over at Kimberly and then back down to his hands. “I’ll admit, I found her attractive. I’d kind of hoped to get the courage to ask her on a date… but I waited a bit too long. I guess that’s one reason I took this whole thing so hard. Missed opportunities and all that.”

“And what makes you think it wasn’t the accident everyone is saying it was? I heard it rained that night. Even if she wasn’t drunk, she had been drinking, and with the wet roads...”

Gray reached into his back jean pocket and pulled out a folded piece of newspaper. “This is why I don’t believe the accident story.” He handed me the paper.

After a quick unfold, I read the short story. Basically, it didn’t sound good for our side. According to the reporter, the vehicle reeked of Peach Schnapps, and there was even an open bottle in the floorboard of her car. Shots of Schnapps could take effect pretty dang quick. Even if she’d been stone-cold sober when she left the bar, if she’d belted a few shots before pulling out of the lot... well, that changed things.

“I don’t see how this helps our cause.”

“That’s because you didn’t know Ashley... or her taste in drinks. She was a Whiskey Sour kind of girl. The one time she changed things up on me, she ordered a Rum and Coke. She always told me that she couldn’t stand those fruity drinks. So for her to have an open bottle of Peach Schnapps in her car? Well, I just don’t believe it. Someone put it there.”

“And the only time they could have put it there would have likely been immediately after the accident, right?” That was from Kimberly. The kids might have left, but she’d sat firm.

“Exactly,” Gray said, nodding to her. “And that means that not only were they on the scene, but they had reason to want to make people think Ashley had been drinking heavier than what she had.”

I refolded the paper and handed it back. Yes, I intended to bring this to Orville’s attention, but there were a ton of places I could get my hands on that same article. “You make a good point.”

“So now you know why I don’t think it was an accident. I’m waiting for your reason.”

Taking a deep breath, I thought about it. As much as Gray seemed a really nice guy, I just didn’t know him well enough to have a good comfort level with spelling everything out for him. But before I could quite figure out how to handle that part of things, Kimberly beat me to it. Turns out, she didn’t have a problem with it at all.

“We’re kind of thinking it has to do with her rich daddy’s last will. We found it in an old desk that Opal bought at an estate sale. I haven’t seen the will, but chances are good he left her something. Maybe a lot.”

His eyes came over to me. “She did say that she was in town to reconcile with her dad. But according to Ashley, she hadn’t had any luck with that. Sounds like you know something I don’t.”

Kimberley opened her mouth again, but I glared at her until she

shut it. I was beginning to see the intelligence of the 'need to know' stuff that Orville was always throwing my way. "I think maybe we do. However, until the sheriff has a chance to really look into this, I don't think we should be sharing that with anyone." I smiled at him. "Please don't take that the wrong way. I appreciate your help. And please know that I'll do everything in my power to see that the truth comes out. All of it."

Gray stared at his hands for a minute, then slowly nodded. "I guess I can see the sense in that. And if you give me your word you'll keep looking into it, then that's really all I can ask. But as far as getting help from the sheriff?" He gave a bitter laugh. "Good luck with that one."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "I don't believe we are talking about the same sheriff here. You most likely dealt with Sheriff Menard, didn't you?"

His brow furrowed. "Well, yeah, he is the sheriff last time I checked."

My smile was grim, but there. "He's your sheriff, not mine, thank the Goddess. You crossed a county line on your way here on that motorcycle of yours. You're in Sheriff Taylor's jurisdiction now." I hesitated. "In fact, he might want to hear from you, now that I've thought about it. Cut out the middle man—or woman in this case—and get this straight from you."

"But the accident happened in my county. What, exactly, can your sheriff do to help?"

"It would appear that Ashley's accident might be tied up with a case that Sheriff Taylor is working on. Jurisdictional lines get a little easier to cross when that's the case."

For the first time, there seemed to be a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "And he would be willing to do that?"

"Just between us, mind you, but he already is."

Gray swallowed and smiled. "Now that's something that does my heart good to hear." He looked around him at my quaint and somewhat humble home. "You know, Opal Ravenswind? You're nothing like I imagined at all."

I gave him a nasty grin. "Oh, I probably am. It's just that so far, you've stayed on my good side." I tilted my head at him. "For the record, that's the side that it's safest to be on."

He laughed. Not exactly the reaction I was going for. "Somehow, I don't doubt that for a minute." Then he turned to Kimberly. "Just so you know, I learn from my past mistakes. Would you like to go to dinner sometime? When I have a night off, that is?"

Kimberly's smile gave her answer away even before she said yes.

I'd definitely be giving Amie a call. I didn't want Kimberly to get

hurt.

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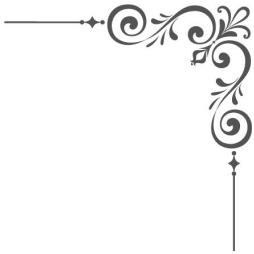

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Chapter 17

Before he left, Gray asked for permission to say goodbye to Mason.

The man was making all the right moves. That kind of had me worried. He could just be a really great guy that I'd lucked into finding and bringing home to Kimberly. If that was the case, well, then... good, I guess.

But he could also be a trickster out to play us both for fools. My heart and intuition really didn't think that was the case, but better to be safe now than sorry later.

We'd barely seen his motorcycle pull out onto the main road before my cell phone went off. Wind's Crossing Sheriff's Department flashed on the screen. He was still at the office.

"Hey, Orville. Got the whole thing wrapped up yet?"

"I wish. But I do have copies of everything, and I'm at the point that I might be willing to share. As long as you agree that the sharing goes both ways. I'm really wanting to hear about that possible grandchild right about now."

"I have more for you too."

"What the... I just left you what, an hour ago? And you already have more? How the devil are you doing this woman?"

I grinned into the phone. "Not by magic, if that's what you're asking. Good, solid investigation techniques. I might be missing the boat by not joining Amie in her new career. I seem to have a knack for it."

"Oh Lord. That is so not what I need right now."

Kind of figured that would be his response. He wasn't all that happy about Amie going into that field. Me? I was sure he would be more than a little unhappy about it. Probably become downright vocal. But he knew me. And he knew how much my little shop meant to me too.

"So, how we going to do this? Throw in a dinner?"

"Well, we do gotta eat anyway, right? Might as well eat together and kill two birds with a single stone." He paused. "Don't suppose you'd be willing to host this one? Maybe do the cooking too? I knew you've had a rough week, but I'm thinking mine just might top it. I'm tired, Opal." Another pause. "Or we could go out if you aren't up to cooking either."

We could, but then we'd have to worry about our conversation being overheard. Maude and the Fontaines were big draws in Wind's Crossing. Money usually is.

"I can cook, Orville. Any requests? As long as the request involves either chicken or pork chops, I'm good. I was wavering between those two tonight. Your choice."

"Any chance of getting that chicken fried?"

The strong, healthy woman in me wanted to remind him that frying chicken wasn't the healthiest way to cook it. But the man had just been through a hard week. Mostly on account of me and my shop. One night of fried goodness shouldn't hurt him too much.

"Just this once, I say the chances are pretty darn good."

"Around five work for you? And is there anything you need me to bring?"

I did a quick rundown of my pantry and fridge in my mind. "Not that I can think of, Orville, just bring yourself and your appetite and you should be good."

"That I can do." And he hung up. Once again, before I'd decided as to whether or not I should bring the L-word into my farewell.

At this rate, I might never have to say it.

AT FIVE MINUTES TO five, the chicken was on a plate layered with paper towels to soak up as much of the grease as possible before consumption. I had to at least do what I could to make it healthier.

Nancy had helped me, practically making the mashed potatoes all by herself. Mason, as usual, had disappeared when the kitchen work started. Now that the aroma was filling the house, and the chores were done, he was back and reaching for a drumstick.

Nancy smacked his hand away. "We have company coming. Be nice."

"Gray?"

"No," I told him. "Sheriff Taylor. Now go upstairs and wash up. We'll be ready to eat in a few."

Even as I said the words, I heard Orville's car coming down the drive. I called up to Kim as I made my way to the door. "Dinner's ready, Kimberly. Come on down and eat."

My eyes widened when I opened the door and saw Orville standing there with a bright bouquet of daisies and colored baby's breath. I glanced over my shoulder to see if Kimberly had made it down yet.

"You're going to have to loosen up a little, Opal. I'm sure that Kimberly knows you and I are more than just casual friends. And even if she doesn't, it's not a sin to bring flowers in payment for a good home-cooked meal, you know. In fact, if one isn't bringing wine, it's

kind of a custom."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I took the flowers all the same. He knew me well enough to know that I much preferred daisies to roses any day of the week. I was just that kind of country gal.

"If you say so." I took the flowers and went to grab a vase from the kitchen to put them in water. They would look mighty pretty as a table centerpiece for the night. Make it look a lot more festive, if I did say so myself.

Orville followed me on the way to the kitchen, passing Nancy on the way. Her hands were full of plates, and she was trying to keep the silverware on the top plate from sliding off. He grabbed the top plate off the stack just in the nick of time.

"Thanks, sheriff!" Nancy giggled. "Guess I should have made two trips, huh?"

"Probably, but I get it. You should see me carrying in bags after a trip to the grocery store. My neighbors probably think I'm crazy. But it works out most of the time and saves steps too."

He sat the silverware down on the table and then started following Nancy around the table, placing the flatware beside each plate as she laid it down. They were done in next to no time.

"Man, that smells good," Kimberly said, coming in behind me. "I can't remember the last time I had homemade fried chicken."

"Yes, well, it's a rare thing that I make such an unhealthy dinner. You can thank the sheriff for it tonight. It was his request."

He grinned. "No thanks required. I'm willing to share the spoils of my victory." He paused. "Although I'm betting it will be a while before Opal leaves herself so open as to dinner requests."

There was no sense in even trying to deny that. My man knew me too well. He was right. It would be quite some time indeed. But that didn't mean that I'd never make him fried chicken ever again. Now that I knew it was a favorite, I'd simply save it for special occasions.

I kind of expected Orville to take the other end of the table from me, but he didn't. Instead, he sat down in the chair right next to me. Kimberly took the other side, after getting baby Pearl situated in her bouncy seat on the floor between us with one of her favorite eye-catching toys. The older kids sat at the end of the table. They left the seat opposite me empty.

Mason looked at all the food, and then at the empty seat. "Too bad we couldn't have invited Gray over to eat with us. There's plenty of food."

Kimberly immediately gave a little blush, and Orville looked from Mason, to her, and finally to me. "And who is Gray?"

"The bartender at that bar out between here and Golden Daze Bed and Breakfast."

He directed an arched eyebrow at me. “Are you saying that Opal Ravenswind went into a bar?”

That earned a grunt. “Sounds kind of like the start to a bad joke doesn’t it? An old witch walked into a bar…”

“For the record, I would never, ever call you an old witch.”

I lifted one shoulder. “Whether you would or wouldn’t doesn’t really matter. I’m old enough, Goddess help me, to have grandchildren at any time. I’m no maiden any longer.” Actually, I was well on my way to crone-hood. Funny thing was, I was okay with that. Really.

But it helped my mood more than a little to know that Orville didn’t think the same. If there was one person on the face of the earth that I wouldn’t want to consider me an old witch, it would be him.

Before I could open my mouth to change the subject to something ever so much more interesting than my age, Kimberly beat me to it.

“So, sheriff, how’s the investigation on the shop… um… break-ins going? Any leads?”

He shook his head. “Afraid not.” He glanced at the younger ones at the end of the table. Only so much we could say in front of them.

Didn’t want the nightmares to start up again, now did we?

“The good news is, I don’t think we have to worry about any more break-ins. At least that’s one small plus in all of this. That and the fact that all they seemed to be interested in was that blasted desk.”

I’d say that I wished I’d never bought the darn thing, but that wouldn’t be true. Even if owning it had brought me a world of annoyance and misfortune. If the desk had gone to someone else, we might never have found out about Ashley. I’m a firm believer in getting justice. For me, for others, for perfect strangers that have ceased to walk the plane of the earth… didn’t matter. Justice was worth a bit of annoyance and the cost of a new door.

“Well, that’s something.” Kimberly turned to me. “Do you plan to open Monday?”

I glanced at the sheriff. “Actually, I was kind of thinking of staying closed for a few more days. Once the sheriff and his people are finished in the back room, I’ll need to get in to clean up all that… broken wood.” I smiled at the kids. “Don’t want anyone getting splinters.”

Nancy nodded sagely. I knew that she knew full well it wasn’t the wood I was worried about getting cleaned up. I also knew that the girl was more adult than kid most of the time. Something I was working hard to correct. I wanted her to have a childhood. Even if it was a shortened one.

“Cool. Maybe we could come up with a fun outing for the kids or something?”

“Actually, I was kind of thinking we might go to the Golden Daze

Bed and Breakfast tomorrow night. They have a pretty good setup for kids, and it would give us a bit of a mini-vacation."

Kimberly's eyes widened. "A night at the bed and breakfast? Count me in. I've heard that Callie's Kitchen serves the best hot breakfast around here. Never been in my price range to check out. Now I think I can manage it."

I shook my head. "The trip would be my treat, dear. There's a little girl there that is kind of lonely. I think the kids would do her a world of good."

That got Orville's full attention. I had known it would.

"Is this the child you alluded to this morning?"

"That would be the one, yes. Care to join us? That's assuming that she has a couple of rooms open. I'll have to call her to be sure."

"Pretty sure this time of year, vacancies won't be a problem." Orville thought for a minute, staring at me the entire time. "You know, I think I might just be able to swing it. If I can get Opie to agree to cover for me for my Sunday night shift. And since he owes me, that shouldn't be a problem."

Then he looked over at Kimberly. "Unless me going would be awkward for you? If it is, just say the word."

She laughed. "Not awkward at all, sheriff. In fact, if we get two rooms, how would you feel about going boy slash girl in them?"

Orville glanced at Mason. "What do you say, Champ? Willing to room with me?"

Mason nodded excitedly. "You bet!" Then he got a calculating look in his eye. "How big are the rooms?"

"No, we aren't inviting Gray. It's far too soon for that," Kimberly said. "We have to get to know him a little better before we ask him for an overnight visit."

She was blushing to beat the band. I tried to hide my smile, but it was a losing battle. "So to answer your previous question a little better, Orville. Gray isn't just the bartender at the local pub. He's also a bit of a magician, something that Mason here has recently taken quite an interest in."

Nancy giggled. "And he's hot, too."

Orville's eyebrows shot up. "A hot magician? Wow, now I want to meet this guy."

"I'm sure you will." In fact, I was fairly certain that Gray was about to become a regular visitor to the farmhouse. Once I had him thoroughly vetted by Amie, of course. I wasn't willing to take a chance with my family's safety, no matter how hot the man was. Or how mesmerizing that easy smile of his might be. Safety first.

I just hoped that Kimberly was of the same mindset as me.

The first plate of chicken was pretty much done. Yes, we'd been

eating while talking. How uncivilized Lily would think us right now. Mixing a bit of business with pleasure. Not her kind of thing. But my house, my rules.

After retrieving the second platter of chicken from the kitchen, I gave Orville a pointed look. “Now, for what I really want to know. I think I’ve been patient enough. Did you find out anything from those pictures and video of Ashley’s car?”

He took a deep breath and gave a brief nod. “I did. The left rear bumper had a brush with something purple.”

I sucked in a deep breath of my own.

“And yes, I checked in with the rental place. Not that he wanted to talk to me again. I will be checking in there more often, I think. But I digress. Good old Brady says that car was in perfect shape before he rented it out. That means that purple scuff happened some time while it was in her possession.”

Yeah, like the very night she took that dive off the road and down the hill into that tree. A hard enough smack to the rear bumper would sure cause something like that to happen.

And wouldn’t you know it? Maude had the only purple car in town that I knew of.

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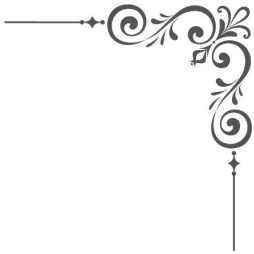

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Chapter 18

Once we had all the work talk out of the way, I excused myself long enough to call Callie and make the reservations. She seemed conflicted as to whether or not to be pleased that we were coming. Especially when I mentioned the sheriff would be accompanying me.

In fact, she seemed downright worried.

I just didn't get it. If Tory stood to inherit a bloody fortune, wouldn't the woman be happy about that? The girl could have the best of things, go to the best of schools, live the best life money could buy. What was I not seeing here?

Maybe inviting Orville to go with us might not have been such a great idea after all. I'd need to make sure I could get a little time alone with Callie too. There were questions I had that she might feel better answering if the sheriff wasn't standing right beside me.

Too late for that now. I'd just have to improvise. Besides, a night out of the house would do us all good. Of course, I'd have to find a way to make it up to Bridget. She'd be fine on her own for no longer than we'd all be gone. But that didn't mean she wouldn't make my life miserable when I got back.

The bird was family, and she knew it. She didn't take kindly to being left behind. But taking her with us... well, that wasn't going to happen.

After dessert—a simple dish of ice cream tonight as I'd put all my remaining stamina into the meal itself—we drug out a kid-friendly board game. Another rousing adventure with Dinosaurs, Chutes, and Ladders it was. Orville turned out to be really good at it. And the fact that he made his little dinosaur come to life with every move had the kids in stitches.

Have I said lately how much I love my man?

He saved the real kicker of the evening, though, until he was ready to leave. "Walk me out to my car?"

I looked at him. A request like that was one thing in the spring, summer, and fall. It was quite another in the dead of winter. But with that came the fact that he had to have a reason to ask, which meant I couldn't exactly turn him down.

"Let me grab my coat."

We walked out to his car, parked out front right by my own. He

opened the passenger side door and reached in to pick up a newspaper on the seat. “Thought you might find the social news part of today’s paper especially interesting.”

He handed me the paper and then bent down to kiss me. I saw the curtain in the living room’s window twitch. We had a watcher. I tried to turn my head to take the kiss on the cheek, but Orville wasn’t having it. He took my face between both his big, strong hands and planted one right on my lips.

Then he looked down at me. “I’m getting tired of hiding our feelings, Opal. Besides, be honest, do you really think we have anyone here fooled?”

I swallowed and glanced back at the window. This was something that we would have to have a long talk about, but not tonight. It was too bloody cold out here, and I’d had far too long of a week to go into it now.

“You know how I feel about this, Orville, but I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can give you right now.”

“Well, if that’s your best, then I guess I’ll take it.” He paused ever so slightly. “For now.”

Then he got into his car and waved to me before backing out of the drive. Why did love have to be so complicated?

The kiss and the brief conversation had distracted me so much that I almost forgot the newspaper I was holding. Once I got inside, I unfolded it to the social section.

Right there in the primary spot was an engagement announcement. Maude Fontaine was getting married.

Who to, you ask?

Why, to none other than the family attorney, one Theodore Kramer. And just like that, things got even more interesting.

THE CHECK-IN TIME AT the Golden Daze was at three in the afternoon, but I kind of figured Callie would be okay if we got there on the early side. After all, this was a playdate too.

I let the kids pack up some of their favorite toys to keep them occupied and to share with Tory. When I saw the size of the bag they ended up with, though, I put my foot down. “Nope. Not gonna happen, guys. Trim that down a lot. You can take one game, and two toys each. And try to pick something a four-year-old would like.”

Frowning, I saw the corner of the magic kit sticking up. “And no magic kit. That’s for here only.” The last thing in the world I wanted to do was have an incident at Callie’s that left the place smelling like a dead rat gone missing.

Mason looked almost in tears. “But I got to practice. I can’t get

good if I don't practice."

I knelt down in front of him to make our eyes on an even level. "That's true. But in order to make the practice really count, you have to take breaks too. Today is a break day. I promise it won't hurt your career as a magician one bit." I hesitated. "And you can bring your cards to show Orville and Callie your card trick if you want."

His eyes lit up, and he darted back into his room. One crisis averted.

I stood back up, far easier said than done, to find Kimberly standing in her apartment's doorway watching me. "You're really good with him."

I shrugged. "He's a good kid. You've done a good job raising him."

Her eyes went to the door of the kid's space. "I've tried my best, that's for sure. It wasn't always easy, but we made it this far."

"Yup. And now you don't have to worry about having to do it all on your own. You've got me."

She smiled at me. It looked like she wanted to say something, but baby Pearl gave a cry from behind her. "Looks like someone's ready to get up from her nap."

Kimberly went to tend the baby, and I went in to supervise the kids' repacking chore. By one o'clock, we were all ready to head out. There was no way we would fit all of us into one, single vehicle. Especially with luggage involved. So, the plan was to meet up at the bed and breakfast around check-in. Sue me if I was planning to get there a bit earlier than that.

The trouble was, I wasn't the only one that had that idea. Maybe something in my demeanor last night had given my plan away. Or just maybe Orville had wanted a little time to talk with Callie on his own too. Either way, we pulled into the small parking lot just as he was getting out of his car.

"Hmm," he said. "I thought we were meeting here around three?"

I met his gaze, stare for stare. "Yes. So did I."

Kimberly and the kids were busy taking the bags out of the trunk, so luckily it was just me and Orville. He scrubbed his chin.

"Don't suppose there's any chance you'd let me have a one-on-one conversation with the owner?"

"Considering that I'm the reason you even know about her, what do you think?"

He blew out a breath. "Well, I had to ask."

"Agreed. No harm, no foul there." I hesitated. "She seemed rather concerned when I said you were coming, just so you know. Take it real easy on her, okay? I don't know why, but I think she's scared."

He glanced at the kids and Kimberly, his eyes lingering on Nancy. "I think maybe I know one thing that might be the cause of that."

I followed his gaze to Nancy, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. Tory. Callie and Maggie had been friends, not family. As such, Callie most likely had no legal right to Tory. Poor thing. No wonder she was worried.

We went in to find a nervous Callie waiting for us. I wanted nothing more than to give her a hug and tell her things would be okay. But who was I to assure her of that? How did I know what would come to pass? Getting the adoption passed for Nancy to become my daughter had seemed to take forever. And yes, I was on pins and needles the entire time. Nothing like having a prize like that be at stake. I had to figure that Callie felt the same.

I'd seen the affection in her eyes every time she even so much as glanced at young Tory. The love was definitely there.

She didn't make us wait for the extra time to check-in. "Don't see the need to make you wait," she said. "Right now, you're the only guests I have. February isn't a huge time for tourism in Michigan, in case you haven't guessed."

I glanced around. The place was just as well kept and clean as it had been on my first visit. "I have to ask. What do you do for income in the down months? A place this big can't be cheap to keep running."

"No, it's a lot of things, but cheap isn't one of them." She blushed, not meeting my eyes. "To tell you the truth, I probably lose money on the whole operation every single year. Most of my income comes from my cookbooks. Callie's Kitchen. I have a whole bunch of them, and lucky enough they sell rather well for me."

I felt my eyes widen. "They must. But then Kimberly was telling me your kitchen has the best reputation for a good home-cooked breakfast in town."

She smiled at me. "I try."

We all signed into the old-fashioned guest book (well, all the adults, anyway), and then followed Callie down a long hallway. She glanced over her shoulder at me on the way. "I put you all back here for a reason. These two rooms are the most private ones I have. This part of the house was an add-on built right before I bought the place."

She opened the door and waved for us to go in. "Plus, you said that you wanted two bedrooms, so I thought my little suite would fit the bill nicely."

I stepped in and almost dropped my bag. The room was gorgeous, and the furniture! Oh, if she ever sold out, I'd be buying up this place's furnishings in a heartbeat. They wouldn't last long in my shop either.

The hardwood floor was waxed and buffed to a high, bright finish, the sofas—two of them!—looked soft and comfy, and there was an overstuffed chair that both Orville and I could easily fit into with a

standing reading lamp behind it. I could so live here. I love my farmhouse, but dang, this was nice. Maybe it was time to do a little updating back home too.

The one thing I didn't see, however, was a bed.

Callie stepped in and past me, walking over to a door on the right. "The sofa on the right makes out into a bed if you need it. And the other sofa sleeps quite well for a single person too. This room," she said as she threw open the door, "has a twin bed and a bunk bed. If the sheriff doesn't mind downgrading to a twin-size bed, this might be perfect for the boys."

She nodded to the other side of the room where there was an almost identical door straight across from this one. "That room only has one king-sized bed, but it has loads of floor space, and there is a rollaway bed in the closet if you want to use it. And I have a portable crib that I can bring up for the baby, too, if you like."

"That would be lovely if it isn't too much trouble to set up," Kimberly said. "Otherwise, we have a sleeping basket that I use sometimes at home when I have Pearl in the bed with me."

"No trouble at all. It only takes a few minutes to set it up, and she's small enough to fit it still." Callie smiled into baby Pearl's bright eyes that were currently taking in everything around her. Nothing much got past baby Pearl. "I'm guessing in another year, that won't be the case."

I glanced over at the super-focused baby Pearl. The woman wasn't wrong. Not that Pearl was fat. Far from it. But she was... long, I guess is what you call babies that aren't old enough to stand up yet. She was going to be a tall drink of water. Just like the last Pearl was.

Orville looked around the suite. From his expression, I gathered he was just as pleasantly surprised by the accommodations as I was. Callie ran a fine bed and breakfast. It was a shame it wasn't earning her a profit. It should be.

But then his eyes went from the room to Callie, and I held my breath. I had an unpleasant feeling I knew what was coming next.

I was right.

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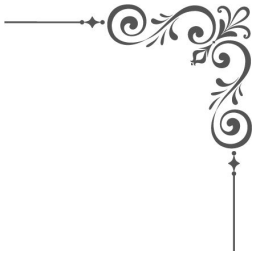

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Chapter 19

"Once we get the children situated, we need to talk," Orville told her.

The change was instant. She almost wilted right before our eyes.

"I was afraid that might be the case," she said quietly. "It isn't often I have guests come to stay here that live in Wind's Crossing." She turned away, probably to hide those watery eyes. "Especially when they bring the sheriff along with them."

Enough was enough. I stepped up beside her and laid my hand on her shoulder for support. "I invited Orville as a close friend of the family. But the fact that he is sheriff does factor in a little. That doesn't mean this has to end badly. I'll help you any way I can. You have my word."

She shook her head and wouldn't meet my eyes. "Follow me."

Back down the long hall we went, but we turned down yet another hall into a part of the house I hadn't previously seen. It didn't disappoint either.

I'd kind of been wondering where Tory was. Part of me was afraid she'd closeted the girl away with a friend or something for our visit. But that wouldn't have been too easy to explain to me when one of the main purposes of this visit was to let the kids get to know each other.

The room we ended up in was a large open room with plenty of seating and a large, clear set of sliding glass doors leading out onto a small, but extremely tasteful sunroom. Tory was in the sunroom, happily playing with a dollhouse and all its fixings.

"This area is usually off-limits to Tory when we have paying guests. But when we don't... well, I don't see the reason to keep her from it then. She loves that sunroom so." Her voice hitched just a little there at the end. "Why don't you kids go and join her? There are a lot of toys in the toy box to choose from."

Like that would be a problem. I'd seen Nancy's eyes when they'd lit on that dollhouse. Funny, I'd never even considered getting her one. Until now. I might have missed the Christmas opportunity, but the girl had a birthday coming up soon. It looked like I had more shopping to do.

Once the kids went out to join Tory and the doors were once again

closed, Callie wilted even more. She drifted over to a chair and sat heavily before looking to Orville.

"Might as well get this over with," she said.

Orville pulled a chair over a little closer to her. Well, I say pulled. Actually, it was more like he carried a chair over. Most likely he didn't want to risk scratching her perfect hardwood floor.

As he was settling in, Kimberly looked at me. "While you all talk, and the kids play... would it be so wrong of me to cut out for a while?"

I smiled at her. "Let me guess. You want to borrow the car while you're at it, don't you?"

She blushed and nodded. "If you don't mind. And if you're okay with me leaving Pearl and Mason to you and Nancy for an hour or two."

The sunroom looked like it had plenty of room to spare. "Fine by me. But could you maybe set baby Pearl up in her bouncy seat out there with the other kids? A little sunshine couldn't hurt her, you know." Besides, Nancy was more than capable of a little babysitting while we grown-ups had our little chat.

She nodded and hurried to get her set up. We waited until she was on her way out to the car before Orville started in.

"Tory is Malcolm Fontaine's granddaughter, isn't she?"

That's my man, all right. Jumping in with both feet.

A tear leaked from one eye as she turned away. "That has never been proven."

"But you know it's true all the same, don't you?"

She hesitated, but finally gave the nod. After all, a DNA test wouldn't take long to provide the needed proof. In the meantime, the family resemblance was stunning enough.

"Callie, I don't understand. If she is Malcolm's granddaughter then she'll have money. Real money, not cookbook money. Don't you want that for her?"

Now the tears started in earnest. "I would think you of all people would understand that there are more important things in life than money, Opal Ravenswind. Like growing up with a loving mother and not a bunch of people that just want you for the money you bring to their bank account."

Orville shot me a glance. Yeah, like I was the one that had rushed into all this.

"I take it you haven't formally adopted her?"

She drew in a deep breath. "All the paperwork is done. I've been trying to get it formalized for months now. I knew that when Malcolm died, I would risk losing her if anyone found out. I was really hoping he'd give me the time I needed to..."

"Make it official?" I finished for her.

Callie just nodded. "If it comes out that Tory is an heir to the estate, everyone and their brother will be vying for her. People with a heck of a lot more influence and pull than what an author of cookbooks has. But I can give something none of them can. Stability. Love. I'd be happy if we never saw a dime of that stupid inheritance."

Yeah, you wouldn't be the only one, I thought. Maude Fontaine would be pretty darn happy herself. Plus, that new fiancé of hers would be pleased as punch too.

"When Ashley was here, do you know if she ever actually got to see Malcolm?" Orville asked. "Did he know he had a granddaughter?"

"No. I thought maybe he was just being his normal greedy turd self, but Opal got me thinking. I don't think Malcolm even knew Ashley came to visit him." She wiped her eyes. "If he had, maybe things wouldn't have ended the way they did. Maybe poor Tory would still have a mother."

"I'm going out on a limb here, but you don't think Ashley's crash was an accident, do you?"

She sat up straighter, her eyes now filled with anger. "No. I don't. She was a careful driver, and she never drank more than one drink at a time. And when she drank, she ate."

"And she never drank Peach Schnapps, did she?" I asked.

Orville gave me an odd look but didn't say anything. I hadn't really had the chance to fill him in on everything I'd learned from Gray yet.

Callie shook her head. "She couldn't stand fruity drinks. She was a whiskey sour kind of gal all the way. Ashley hated sweet drinks."

"And why is that relevant?" Orville asked. But he was looking at me, not Callie.

"It's relevant because according to the newspaper article about the crash, the car had an open bottle of Peach Schnapps in the floorboard, and there were stains of where it had fallen onto Ashley's blouse. Kind of odd, huh? Seeing as how she had only drunk one whiskey sour at the bar while she ate an order of loaded fries and chatted with Gray."

His eyebrows arched. "There's that Gray again. It sounds like I need to have a chat with him."

"Could be wrong, but I think he'd welcome it. He didn't get very far with the sheriff in charge of the investigation. I told him you were different. It's up to you to prove me right on that."

His eyes went to the door. "That's where Kim was going, wasn't it?"

"Yup. You might want to wait a bit before going to talk to him. This is all new to Kimberly, and I think she kind of needs it right now."

"Are you saying that you are investigating Ashley's death?" Callie's

voice held a little hope. “That’s why you’re here?”

“Well, yes. That and to let the kids have a playdate.” I gave her as soft a look as I could. “Tory needs to be around other children. It’s not good for her to be alone with grown-ups all the time.”

Callie gave a little nervous laugh and reached for a tissue to dry her eyes. “Then there really isn’t any need to bring Tory into this, is there?”

Orville looked conflicted. “I can’t lie to you. It might very well come up. But for right this moment, it’s not a top priority for us. Getting justice for Ashley and finding out who killed Vince Riley is.”

I saw the slight blanch when Orville mentioned Riley. But I don’t think Orville caught it. He totally would have, I’m sure, but he’d been watching the kids at the time.

Lucky break for Callie, that.

OUR LITTLE CONVERSATION ended at that. It helped that Nancy chose that precise moment to come in to inform me that baby Pearl needed changing. Funny, Nancy had no problems giving baby Pearl her bottle, burping her, and playing with her. She was a lot like a tiny second, or maybe third, mother to the infant.

But when it came to changing diapers? She pulled the ‘I’m just a kid’ card to get out of it. Not that I blamed her. Especially when the diapers smelled as foul as this one did.

Tory followed me and baby Pearl back into the house, her little nose wrinkled. “Do all babies smell that bad?”

I laughed. “No. And for the most part, baby Pearl smells rather nice. It’s just that, as she can’t walk yet, she can’t make it to the bathroom to do her business.” I patted the diaper. “That’s why she wears these.”

Tory’s head tilted, and she looked over at Callie. “Did I used to wear those too?”

“Yes, you did. And you smelled particularly bad when you filled them with boom-boom too.”

Her little teeth caught her lower lip. “How long before she can walk?”

“I’m afraid she’ll be in diapers for a couple more years at least. But she only smells this bad once or twice a day, I promise.” I really hoped that was a promise I got to keep. Don’t prove me wrong, baby Pearl. Your friendship with an heiress might just depend on it.

As it turned out, Nancy wasn’t the only one with an aversion to smelly diapers... and the changing of them. Big strong man Sheriff Orville Taylor beat a hasty retreat out into the sunroom with the kids. What wimps men could be sometimes.

But it served a good purpose for me. Especially seeing as how he had closed the sliding glass doors behind him. I laid baby Pearl out on the sofa to change her. Lucky for me, Callie had stayed behind.

"You hired Vince Riley to break into my shop, didn't you?" Even with the doors closed, I kept my voice low.

It was all starting to come together in my mind. Sometimes it took a while. But thinking back to her nervous reaction to me showing up on her doorstep and her obvious relief that all we wanted to talk about was Ashley's accident? Well, things finally started clicking for me.

There was a moment of silence. I didn't press her. Sometimes it was better just to throw a hard question like that one out into existence and then simply wait for the answer.

I noticed she glanced at those closed glass doors before she replied.

"You know I can't answer that, right? If I had a criminal record attached to me, the adoption would fail for sure. So, even if the answer to that were yes, I'd still have to say no. And I'm not saying it should be yes, either." She paused. "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"A bit, yes. But I get the message." I was taking my time with the diaper changing, taking advantage of the brief window of opportunity it gave us for private conversation. "But hypothetically, if you had hired Vincent, then I would assume that meant you knew about the will. I'm wondering how you found out about it. And, come to think of it, how you seemed to know right where to find it."

She swallowed. "Well, hypothetically, perhaps Malcolm reached out to me there at the end. Maybe even sent a personal carrier with a message telling me where to find the will after he passed."

Ah, now that made sense. "I'm surprised he got the message through his personal guards."

Callie hugged herself. "Yes, well, there at the end, he seemed particularly anxious to put things right. That personal carrier he sent just might have been his personal physician."

Even more sense.

"I see."

Her eyes sought out mine. "So what now?"

"I'm pretty sure I know the answer to this, but you know I have to ask it, anyway. And no hypothetical answers to this one, I'm afraid. I need a straight-out answer." I paused until she nodded. Reluctantly, but she did. "Did you have anything to do with Riley's death?"

She jerked back like I'd slapped her. "Of course not! He was working for me. Why on earth would I have killed him?"

Then she realized she'd just made the confession to the earlier crime. "Oh, crap. I don't suppose we can forget that part about working for me?"

I thought for a minute. I had a hard time agreeing to keep secrets from Orville. Besides, he was likely to put it all together the same as I had. Eventually, he'd be coming to it.

"Well, technically, you didn't say what he was doing for you, now did you? Might be he was trying to go straight as a handyman or something."

"That's true. He was..."

"Nope. Don't even finish that. I'd rather we told each the truth and stuck to hypothetical questions and answers. Makes it easier on me with the sheriff."

"You two are close, aren't you? I mean, closer than just friends?"

How did one answer that? I could only think of one way. "Hypothetically, that might be true. However, that's between the two of us. Don't you agree?"

She smiled at me. "Somehow it makes me feel just a tiny bit better knowing that I'm not the only one with secrets around here."

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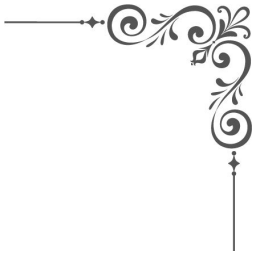

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Chapter 20

The rest of the evening was all about the kids. By the time bedtime rolled around—far too early for the kid's liking, but it was a school night—Mason, Nancy, and Tory were fast friends. Kids are like that. They can form lasting friendships in almost no time at all. Not like us cynical, untrusting adults.

With the extra-long drive to school, morning came far too early. Even for me. Callie surprised me by having a big breakfast waiting for us. Well, it was big by my standards. Callie was apologizing for the lack of selection. With pancakes, scrambled eggs, and biscuits and gravy, I didn't think there was any need for an apology.

No way could we pass up that tempting smell. Or insult Callie by not eating our fill. But it ran us closer on time getting the kids to school than what I liked. We made it, but barely.

As Kimberly and I sat in the car watching the kids jog into the school building to make it to their classrooms before the last bell, Kimberly turned to me. "What are the plans for today?" She gave a slight shudder. "I can start the cleanup of that backroom if you like."

"No need. Orville gave me the name of a cleaning outfit that specializes in that kind of thing. He agreed to let them into the shop and check in on them occasionally too. According to him, they are highly trusted and reliable. Said it should just be a one-day job, if that."

Her shoulders dropped. "Well, that's good news." She paused as the kids disappeared into the building, and I started to back the car out of the parking space. "I have a couple more errands to run if you don't mind? I can take Pearl with me today."

I glanced over at her. "That might be best. I have an errand or two to run on my own."

That was the Goddess' own truth, that. Orville was good at his job, and I knew within reason he'd be tracking down the source of that purple paint. Not that we could ever prove anything, what with the evidence now being buried in a huge cube of metal, but still. That angle was covered.

Personally? I kind of thought it was time to go straight to the horse's mouth. I wanted a talk with Maude.

We got home and went our separate ways. My first duty was taking

care of Bridget. That included more than one cracker and quite a few minutes of undivided attention. Her feathers were definitely ruffled. Trust me when I say that you do not want a ticked off familiar.

Just my luck to have a bird with an attitude like Bridget as a gateway to my magic. Not that I had to go through her, of course, but things generally went a lot smoother when I did. Bridget was a very good familiar. At least, when she wasn't ticked off. Which was at least part of the time.

Once I had her somewhat appeased, I took a deep breath and called the Fontaine's residence. Imagine my surprise when Maude herself answered the phone.

"Fontaine Residence. Maude Fontaine speaking."

"Ah, just the woman I wanted to speak with. This is Opal Ravenswind." I wasn't trying to be dramatic or anything, or maybe I was just a bit, but I paused after giving her my name. Let her have time to deal with all the implications that a call from me could bring. As I've said before, I have a pretty hefty reputation about town. "I was wondering if we might meet for coffee?"

I know it probably wasn't possible to hear someone swallow over the phone, but I swear that's what it sounded like.

"I've rather been expecting your call," she said.

Well, that was news to me. I hadn't even thought of making the call until this morning. And she was expecting it? Now I wanted to talk to her even more than before.

"Why don't you come over this morning? We can talk here."

I had to bite my tongue to keep the laugh from getting out. Like that would happen. Someone with a purple car drove Ashley off the road, and someone with an interest in that blasted will killed Vincent Riley. At least those were my suspicions at the moment. No way was I meeting the woman in a place with no witnesses.

I wasn't born yesterday.

"How's about we meet at the Flour Pot? I find myself craving one of their raspberry delights." That was true enough. I craved them most of my waking hours. Today, after the big breakfast I'd eaten, I might even finally limit myself to just one. Wouldn't that be a record day for me?

She hesitated but finally agreed. "Meet there in say, an hour?"

Sounded good to me. That should be right smack in between the big breakfast rush and the big lunch rush. With any luck, we'd be able to snag a private little table just for the two of us.

We ended the call, and I was left with an hour to kill. The farmhouse was in good shape, thanks to Kimberly's help, so I decided to be nice and swing by to see Orville. I even made a preemptive stop at the Flour Pot and asked to reserve the most private table in the

place for my little meeting. The owner didn't normally reserve tables, but the two of us went way back. After all, one of his donuts had caused me a world of hurt a while back. Not that he had anything to do with that. Still, it counted.

When I walked into the sheriff's office with coffee in one hand and a box of Flour Pot's best donuts in the other, Orville's eyes lit up. The rest of us might have had the benefit of a big home-cooked meal, but Orville had left at the very crack of dawn. Well, more like an hour before the crack of dawn, if truth be told.

He stood to greet me. "And to what do I owe this pleasant surprise?" Then his smile faded. "Please tell me this isn't the start of a good news, bad news kind of thing."

I sat the box down on the main table for everyone to share, but handed him the coffee. That was for him alone. I didn't have enough hands to bring coffee for the entire staff.

"Nothing like that. I had some time to kill, and I had a quick question to ask you."

Orville nodded, then held up one finger. He grabbed a napkin and took a couple of donuts from the box. Picking up his still steaming coffee, he motioned with his head for me to follow him.

We ended up in an interrogation room of all places. But I got it. His desk was rather front and center out front. They'd offered him an office years ago, but he'd turned it down. He enjoyed being in the thick of things. One of the many reasons he was so good at this.

He sank down onto one of the chairs at the small table and took a big bite from the first donut. With mouth full, he gave a little 'go on' motion with his hand.

"Well, you're the best legal expert I know, and I have a hypothetical question for you."

He swallowed and took a swig of coffee. "I take it you'd like this question to be off the record?"

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Does that work with law enforcement?"

Orville grinned at me. "No. But people still tend to think if they say 'off the record' it protects them or something. It doesn't. Not here."

"Good to know." I paused. I was taking a really big chance here, but in all likely hood, Orville would get there sooner or later in his investigation, anyway. "Hypothetically speaking, if I should decide not to press charges against the person who hired Vince Riley, would that be an option?"

He took two more slow bites before the darn man answered. "You mean you don't want Callie to go to jail?"

"How long have you known?"

“Probably just as long as you have. She turned rather white when Riley was mentioned. That and with how relieved she was to find out we were there about Ashley. Well, it didn’t exactly take a rocket scientist to figure it out.”

“And the answer to my question?”

“What, no hypothetical tag this time?”

“Just answer me, Orville, or I swear I’ll arrange it that you never eat another Flour Pot donut for as long as you live.”

He held up both hands. “Now, now, don’t get testy.” Then he thought about it. “Could you actually do that?”

I gave him double-arched eyebrows and stayed silent.

“All right, then. That’s good to know.” He paused. “The law is kind of tricky on that one. I mean, hiring someone to commit a crime is a crime in and of itself. As such, there isn’t any actual need for you to press charges. The state and or county generally does that for you.”

As my niece, Amie would say right about now: Crapsnackles.

He held up a finger again. “However, without a signed confession, I really don’t know how we’ll ever be one hundred percent positive who hired Riley. I mean, what with him being dead, we can’t very well ask him, now can we?” Then he looked me dead in the eyes. “That answer totally changes if there’s even a ghost of a chance that she had anything to do with his death.”

“Understood.” Even I wasn’t willing to let a person get by with murder. No matter what the reasoning behind it. That path only led to madness. “But do you really think that will be an issue?”

Orville looked sadly down at his empty napkin. No more donuts. Well, he should have grabbed three while he had the chance. That box would be empty by now.

“No, but I had to stake out the ground rules all the same.”

I nodded. “While we’re in here. You have any luck tracing that purple paint?”

“You do know we’ve only been apart for a few hours, right? These things take time. But I’m working on it.”

Fine by me. He could work his angle, and I could work mine. I was betting mine would yield much faster results.

I had a meeting to attend.

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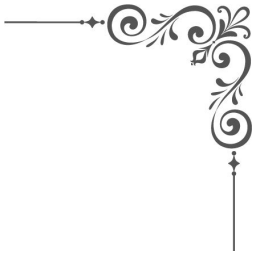

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Chapter 21

When I stepped into the Flour Pot, I was ten minutes early. And Maude was already there.

I walked slowly to the table, taking a good look at her as I did. She was a beauty, there was no denying that. Tall, slender in the right places and full in the places men generally liked their women to be full. Long, golden waves of hair, and bright ice-blue eyes that could stare straight into your soul. And those lips! That just couldn't be natural.

Well, now that I got a closer look at her, I was very much doubting much of Maude Fontaine was natural at all. I was starting to think the woman was self-made. Too bad. I like my beauty made by the God and Goddess, not some plastic surgeon with a padded bank account.

She stood as I got close and motioned for me to take the other seat. "The owner said you reserved this table for us? That was nice." She gave a glance around. From the position of the table, if we kept our voices down, we could have a fairly private conversation. Especially as this was non-peak hours for the shop. "I was kind of afraid we wouldn't really be able to talk. But this should work."

In fact, there were only three others dining in. Most people got their food and coffee to go. Everyone and their busy, hectic lives. It helped that the Flour Pot didn't offer free internet access. One of the few coffee shops not to do so. Personally, I liked that fact. Kept the place a lot less crowded.

The owner shocked me by coming to the table to get our order. That wasn't normal at all. And for once, I didn't think it was my influence that had him so agreeable. He'd most likely never had an actual Fontaine step through his front door before. He probably saw an untapped opportunity here. That might have been why the table had been so easy to reserve, now that I thought about it.

She waited until we got our coffee, no donuts for either of us, a fact that disappointed the owner to no end. But I needed to cut back, and somehow, looking at Maude, I didn't think donuts were a normal food for the Fontaines. In fact, it was most likely she didn't consider them as actual food at all.

It made me kind of pity them. They didn't know what they were missing. As for me, I'd be taking my one lonely donut to go. I didn't

want anything to distract me for the next few minutes.

"So how much do you want?"

I just looked at her. "What?"

Another glance around the room, then she lowered her voice even more. "Look, I'd much prefer we just cut to the chase. We both know why we're here. How much do you want for... the packet?"

Ah, now I understood. "Actually, that has nothing to do with why I asked to meet you." Well, not in the way she was thinking, anyway.

Her eyes narrowed. "But you aren't denying that you found a packet in the desk?"

I shook my head. "Oh, I found it all right."

"Then where is it? And how much do you want for it?"

It might have been wrong of me, but I pulled a bit of magic. I wanted to impress the strength of my next words. "You don't know much about the Ravenswinds, do you? We don't put prices on things like that. We do what's right."

She relaxed the tiniest of bits. "Oh, so you're going to turn it over to Malcolm's lawyer? That's good to hear."

"You mean your fiancé? Somehow, that just didn't strike me as the right thing to do. The will is in expert hands. A prominent attorney in Oak Hill is seeing to the details."

Her face flushed, and she bolted out of her chair. "You had no right to do that!"

I didn't make a move. I was learning a lot just by watching Maude and her actions. Finally, she took the hint and sat back down.

"The will should have gone to Malcolm's attorney, and you know it." There was more than a little hiss to her voice.

"And maybe if he hadn't been such a prominent feature in your life as well as Malcolm's, it would have."

"Don't judge me. Our engagement started well after Malcolm passed away. I did nothing wrong. I was faithful to my husband."

It was all I could do not to laugh. But I didn't think that would go over very well. "Well, what's done is done. Now, do you mind if I ask you a question of my own?"

She glared at me. "That depends entirely on the question."

"Last year, a young woman came to see Malcolm. She was kept from seeing him, even though she tried several times. She probably would have kept trying, but someone in a purple vehicle ran her off the road. Then they made it look like it had been a drunk driving accident. We almost have the proof we need to show that wasn't the case."

Maude wouldn't meet my eyes. "The girl was a gold-digger and nothing more." Well, wasn't that the pot calling the kettle black? "She was just after an inheritance. All she wanted was money."

Funny that she focused on the gold-digging angle instead of the possible murder victim angle. That said a lot, didn't it? Not a single heart-felt denial about that purple vehicle's involvement, either. That said even more to me.

"Actually, all she wanted was to meet her father. Something you denied her being able to do, if I have my facts straight. But I'd like to get back to my question, if I may. Where were you the night she was killed?"

Maude smiled and leaned back in her chair. I really didn't like the look of that smile.

"I was in Oak Hill at a fundraiser. There was news coverage of the event, so there should be plenty of eyewitnesses, even from people who weren't actually in attendance. And at the time of the accident, if I'm not mistaken, we'd all just sat down for dinner. It was rather a big deal."

It was also funny how she knew exactly what she'd been doing at the time Ashley had been killed. That sounded a lot like someone setting up a rock-solid alibi for something they knew would happen.

"Follow up question... and please know that we are checking other sources as well, so it might behoove you to tell the truth on this one... where was your car on the night of Ashley's death?"

Did she just lose a bit of color? I think maybe she did. But it came back with a vengeance.

"My car was at home in the garage, with the keys in it." She hesitated. "And if you're checking out other sources, then I might as well tell you that yes, there was damage to its front bumper the following morning." Maude sat a little straighter. "Security wasn't as tight as I'd like it to have been, and I have no idea who took my car for a joyride. Or why they would do so."

"Oh, I think the why is fairly apparent, things being what they are."

"Well, if what you think happened really happened, it wasn't me behind the wheel. And I have no idea who took the car that night. It could have been anyone."

"But whoever it was, they were nice enough to bring the car back. Doesn't that seem a mite suspicious to you?"

She pushed her coffee to the center of the table, grabbed her purse, and stood. "We're done here."

I watched her leave as I sipped my coffee. She might indeed be done. But I was only getting started.

TO MAKE THINGS UP TO the owner of the shop, I ordered a half dozen donuts to go. Even though they were fresh out of my Raspberry

Delights.

I kind of felt I owed him at least that, as I was pretty sure it would be a frosty day in you know where before a Fontaine stepped foot inside his shop again. Well, Maude Fontaine anyway. I rather think Tory would like the place. She'd enjoy the food too.

By the time I made it back to the farmhouse, Kimberly was back from her errands, and in a good mood. Things must be going well for her right now. It was about time things turned around for the girl. She deserved it.

Gray had better treat her right, or he'd find out just how much the Ravenswinds had earned their reputation.

I threw my purse and keys down on the entry table as I walked in. Kimberly was bustling about in the kitchen. "I'm throwing a pot roast into the crockpot for dinner. That sound good to you?"

"When does pot roast ever sound bad?" I called back, grinning. Having someone to share the kitchen duties was super nice. Neither Ruby nor Amie had ever really stepped up to the plate on that one. Only when I insisted. It was nice to have someone like Kimberly around that took the initiative all on their own.

I turned to go into my little apartment and stopped dead in my tracks. That blasted doll's case was sitting right there in the middle of my little living room floor.

It was closed, but what did that really mean? The only way I'd know for sure the doll was still inside the darn thing was to look. That was a real quandary. No way did I want to open that case's lid. But if I didn't, I'd be looking over my blasted shoulder all dang day.

"Kimberly?" I called out, my voice tight. "Do you know why Nancy's doll case is in my room?"

"What?" She walked over and peeped over my shoulder. "Why on earth would Nancy bring it down here?"

"That's just it. It wasn't here this morning. I'd have seen it. And the kids are still in school, right?"

Kimberly's frown deepened. "Yeah, they are. You sure it wasn't here this morning? You could have missed seeing it. We weren't here long."

I gave a small shudder. No way had I missed that thing.

"I'm sure. Don't suppose you have any idea how it got here?"

She shook her head and crossed her heart with two fingers. "It wasn't me, I swear." She hesitated. "And the wards are still up and running, aren't they?"

I nodded. Then who? There were only three of us in the house. Me, Kimberly, and... baby Pearl.

Even as I had that last thought, I heard her giggle from the other room.

“Deal with it, Pussycat.” Bridget delivered the words in the closest thing to my mother’s tone of voice that I’d heard in years.

My head snapped to face her. “What did you say?” My eyes were staring hard into Bridget’s little black orbs.

“Deal with it, Pussycat. It’s just a doll.”

“Oh, Goddess.” The room started spinning around me, and Kimberly caught me as I stumbled and almost fell. I held on to consciousness, but it was a close thing.

“Are you okay, Opal?” Kimberly’s eyes bore down into mine. “Do I need to get you to a doctor?”

I shook my head. “Just help me over to the chair.” She did. I really hated having to ask the next favor of her. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to look in that case and see if the doll is in there?”

Kimberly’s frown was firmly implanted by now. Her eyes went from me, to Bridget, and finally to the case on the floor. She strode over to it, and with no hesitation whatsoever, she flipped open the lid. The unlocked lid, I might mention.

“Well?” I also hated the fact that I was holding my breath for her answer.

“It’s here. Safe and sound.” She reached into the case.

“No! Don’t take it out!”

Startled, she stood up and looked at me. “It isn’t Chucky you know. It’s actually kind of pretty, in its own way. Maybe if you saw it…”

This time I couldn’t have stopped the shudder if I tried. “No, thank you. I really think that thing needs to just disappear. I don’t know what Sapphire was thinking, letting Nancy bring it here. She knows my issues with those kinds of dolls.”

“And what…” her voice trailed off as my cell phone started ringing from my purse. She turned to grab my purse for me, but I stood first. I wanted some distance between myself and that darn case and its contents.

“Just shut that case and take it back upstairs, please? And put something really heavy on top of it too, okay? I’ll get the phone.”

The call was on the fourth ring before I picked it up. I’d wanted to see Kimberly get moving on the case first.

“Opal Ravenswind,” I answered.

“Opal, please, you have to help! Someone has taken Tory!”

My mind snapped back into place in a heartbeat. “Have you called the sheriff?”

“Yes, he’s on his way. But can you come too? Can you find her?”

“Hunt out something to use as a focus for a finding spell. Hair from her hairbrush would work great. I’ll be there as soon as I can be.”

I ran back into my apartment just long enough to grab a pre-mixed spell bag. I tried to keep a few on hand. It made things go a lot faster

when the need was urgent. And you just didn't get more urgent than a missing child.

By the time I was heading out the door, Kimberly was coming back down the stairs. "What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

"No. Someone's taken Tory. I'm on my way there now."

Her face lost color. "I'll call Gray. He lives a mile away from there. He'll meet you there."

I nodded. Having a male presence couldn't hurt, and it would take the sheriff a while to get there. I'd beat him for sure.

I was halfway up the big hill before it finally occurred to me that we might not have been talking about the same sheriff.

Too late for me to do anything about that now. At the speed I was going, making a phone call was out of the question.

I just hoped that Orville's mistrust of the other sheriff's office didn't get proven. Not today, and not with this.

Hold on, Tory. I'm coming.

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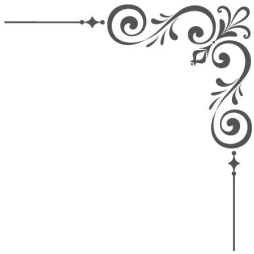

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Chapter 22

My fears on the sheriff were fully realized when I pulled into the parking lot to see an unfamiliar sheriff's vehicle already there. When I dashed in the front door, Sheriff Menard didn't seem thrilled to see me. Quite the opposite, in fact.

He whirled on me. "You stay out of this. This isn't the time or place for any of your witchcraft tomfoolery."

I brushed past him, ignoring his words. He had his job to do, and I had mine. You would think they would be one and the same. But if it was me, I wouldn't just be standing there with an open notebook asking questions. Time was wasting.

"Do you have the hair?"

Callie handed me a small bag, and I dumped the ingredients into the prepared spell and mumbled the words under my breath. The Goddess would hear them, and that was all that mattered to me.

Almost instantly, a thin blue line glimmered in the air, and I was running. The sheriff reached for me as I passed him, but I dodged and kept going full speed. Catch me if you can, sheriff. At least we'd be heading in the right direction when you did.

I got past, but Callie wasn't so lucky. I could hear her arguing with Menard, right up until I reached the out of earshot range. That was fine with me. Somehow, I didn't think Menard would be much backup, anyway.

The blue shimmer led me straight into the woods. In a way, that did my heart good. I'd been more than half afraid that it would lead to the parking lot and a missing car. I didn't think I had a high-speed chase in me right now. Not that I wouldn't have tried my darndest to be up to the challenge. But no. Whoever took her had headed into the woods.

That thought brought chills all of its own.

I heard the growling first. Seconds before I ran full tilt into the clearing.

There stood Attorney at Law, Theodore Kramer. He had a shovel in one hand and a pistol in the other. Of course, at my appearance, the pistol shifted from the wolf before him to me.

I opened myself wide to the magic, and it started pouring in. Not that it would stop a bullet, mind you. But magic was good for other

things too.

"Where's the girl, Teddy?"

He didn't say anything, but his quick glance into the hole in front of him made me see red.

I didn't have time to keep him talking until reinforcements arrived. I kind of thought the large gray wolf standing over the small hole was all I was going to get. I was betting that wolf was a gift from the Goddess, and I knew better than to question it.

If it was keeping Teddy from filling in that hole, it was a friend, in my opinion. I took a step forward, and the gun leveled at my heart.

"I really have nothing against you, you know. For what it's worth, I'm sorry that you had to go and get involved in all this. If anyone else had bought that desk, things wouldn't have to end here for you. As it is, I'm sorry, but I hope you're ready to meet your Goddess."

"Don't I get at least one final question?"

He laughed. "What, to give the others time to get here? Sorry."

Two things happened almost exactly at the same time. One, I dodged to the left and hit the ground just as the gun went off. If nothing else, hearing a gunshot in the woods should get Menard into gear. But then, before I had a chance to stand and run, there was another shot. This time from behind me.

Teddy went down like a sack of bricks, clutching his shoulder. More importantly to me, he dropped the gun. I darted for it and grabbed it up before he could retrieve it. Then I glanced over my shoulder to thank Menard. Maybe we were wrong about him, after all.

Only it wasn't Menard standing there with the smoking gun. It was my Orville.

Seeing him gave me the courage to let Teddy out of my sight, and I ran for that hole. The wolf moved to let me in, his worried eyes meeting mine. I reached in and pulled the girl out, laying her on the more solid ground to one side. Then my fingers searched for that pulse at the base of her throat.

It was slow but strong. And I could breathe again.

The rat had been going to bury the child alive. I stood, my hair flowing out to all sides. Teddy took one look at me and starting crab-crawling away from me. Towards the sheriff.

Like that was going to help him.

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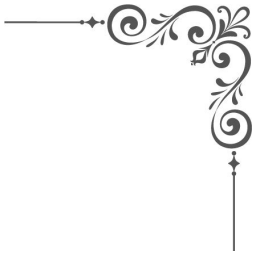

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Chapter 23

When you use magic in anger, it almost never ended well. I was sure it wouldn't have ended well for me, either. If I had let loose with the magical blast of my full fury, I probably would have killed Teddy. And I would have had repercussions to face from it for the rest of my life.

I like to think that when Orville stepped between me and the worthless, murdering lawyer, that he did so to save me rather than him. Sometimes following the letter of the law meant you had to let the bad guys live to draw breath another day.

If Tory hadn't been safe, I'm pretty sure, Orville or no, I would have ended the man then and there. Luckily, that didn't have to happen.

I carried Tory back toward the house, following Teddy and Orville. Orville would have taken her, but I didn't want that gun of his off Teddy for one second. If the man had any tricks up his sleeve, I wanted to make sure Orville was ready for them.

As it was, we were met halfway by Callie, and then Menard. From the look of things, she'd finally broken away from him, and he was just trying to catch up with her. The man was breathing hard, and she met us well before he did.

I saw Orville shake his head and heard his mumbled, "Just pitiful." But I don't think anyone else did. Personally, I don't think pitiful was nearly a strong enough word to use for Menard. Wind's Crossing didn't know just how lucky they were with our luck of the draw for sheriff.

Callie reached me just as Tory started coming to. I held her out to Callie, honestly thankful for the break. The child had been getting heavy, and I wasn't in the best of shape myself. Not after the nerve-wracking last hour, anyway.

I saw the relief on her face as she gathered Tory in her arms and fell to her knees, crying. "I thought I'd lost you."

My heart went out to her as I watched her rock the waking child back and forth in her arms. "I think we need to take her to be seen by a doctor. We need to make sure she's okay." I was fairly certain that Teddy had used the old Chloroform standard of most villains, but a quick check-up was in order all the same. We didn't want any residual

side effects hitting the child.

She nodded. “I could sure use a lift, though. I’m not at all sure I can let go of her long enough to drive us myself. Not that I’m in any shape to drive right now, anyway.”

“I’ll drive you.” Gray stepped out from the trees lining the path. I have to admit, I did a double-take when I saw the man standing there in nothing more than a tank top and a pair of running shorts. Just how hot-blooded was the man? “Sorry it took me so long to get here. I was out for my run when Kim called.”

His eyes softened as they went to Tory. “Is she okay?”

A bleeding man with a gun trained on him, two sheriffs, and a distraught Callie before him, and his first question was about Tory. That right there eased a lot of the doubt I’d had about him. To me, that was the sign of a good man.

Then his eyes hit mine for the briefest of moments, and I almost gasped from the strength of the gaze. There was something there. Gray had power. Not witch power, but… something. And just like that, a little of that doubt doubled back.

I was really hoping he was on our side. Or maybe even more importantly, the Goddess’ side.

Then my mind went back to that wolf. The one that had miraculously appeared just when needed to save a child’s life. Maybe that wolf hadn’t been sent from the Goddess, after all. Or at least not in as direct a fashion as I’d at first thought. Just maybe, that wolf had gotten a call to be there.

The thought of werewolves being real was still fairly new to me. But once that thought entered my mind, I just couldn’t shake it. Something in Gray’s eyes told me I was right about this one.

We helped Callie gather what she needed, and then to lock up the bed and breakfast. Menard insisted on being the one to make the arrest, even though that rankled my feathers to no end. Kramer better dang well end up behind bars and stay there, or Menard would have one heck of a Karma spell thrown at him.

Hemorrhoids would be the least of the man’s torments. I was getting good at those focused Karma spells. He’d never know what hit him. And even if he figured it out… well, how the devil could he prove it?

“You okay to drive home?” Orville asked softly.

I thought about it, then nodded. “Yeah. You got to go back to the office?”

“Yup. Much as I’d like to hang out with you for a bit, I really need to start the paperwork to get Kramer transferred to Wind’s Crossing. I just don’t trust Menard.”

That made two of us.

Then he stepped in and kissed me for a solid minute. Afterward, he rested his forehead against mine.

"That was far too close back there," he whispered. "Please don't go running off on your own again. Next time wait for me. I was only a few seconds behind you, you know."

"I can't promise that, Orville, not when a child's life is on the line." Or a family member, or... well, you. I'd risk my life for a loved one any day of the week.

"I'm thinking I might need to start keeping better tabs on you, Opal Ravenswind."

Okay, that got my interest. "And just how do you plan to do that, Sheriff Taylor?"

He laughed softly. "Oh, you'll see. Soon. But I'm not quite there yet."

And just like that, my heart was racing again. What on earth was my man planning on doing?

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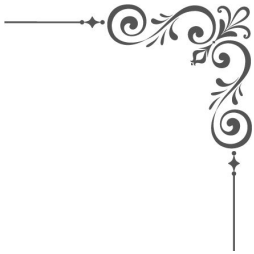

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Chapter 24

The next morning things got back more to normal. Well, at least they got on the right track to normal, anyway.

Kimberly and I dropped the kids off at school, and then, with deep breaths, we opened the door into the backroom. I wanted to see what the place looked like before I made the final decision to reopen.

I had to blink more than a couple of times. The backroom was sparkling clean. Not a sign that anything untoward had ever happened within its four walls.

That was nice, but not what caused my breath to catch. There, standing where the old Fontaine desk had stood, was a new desk. Well, I say a new desk... that wasn't technically accurate. It was an old desk. A very, very old desk.

"I hope you like it." I jumped when Orville's voice came from right behind me, and I heard Kimberly giggle before ducking into the front to open up the shop.

I ran my hand over the smooth and polished wood. It was gorgeous. Simple and ornate all at the same time. I'd have chosen this one over the Fontaine desk every single time.

"I love it. How did you do this?" I'm in the antique business. You didn't get a desk like this one overnight. Or in the space of a long weekend, either.

"It took a little help from Sapphire. She sends her regards, by the way." His brow furrowed. "She also said I should tell you that hopefully this makes up for Sally?" He shook his head. "Not at all sure what that means. She didn't elaborate."

"Sassy. And, as beautiful as this desk is, no it doesn't."

He arched an eyebrow at me, but I wasn't ready to elaborate on that, either.

Luckily my cellphone chose that moment to go off. Thank you, Goddess, for that one. My man can be insistent at times, and he had that stubborn look on his face right now.

"Opal Ravenswind," I answered.

"Just for the record, I had nothing to do with any of this."

I held the phone out and glanced at the caller ID. In my rush for the wanted distraction, I hadn't even looked. Maude Fontaine.

"Oh?" Sorry, but I wasn't buying that. At all.

She sighed. “Teddy and I go way back, that much is true. And yes, me getting Malcolm to take me down the aisle was all his idea. Our retirement plan, he called it. But that’s where my involvement ended. Right at the I Dos. I did right by Malcolm.” She paused. “I even grew to love him, in my own way.”

“You kept Ashley from getting to know her father.” I left it at that. Orville was still tracking down the details to be able to charge Kramer with Ashley’s death. I didn’t want to risk saying anything to cause him more trouble with that.

Silence. Then finally, “Yes, I did. I’d say I’m sorry about that, but I really do think she was just out for the money. Despite what everyone else is saying to the contrary.”

“And don’t you think that is just a tad bit ironic? Given the reason you married Malcolm and all?”

“Maybe. But the main thing I wanted you to know is that I had nothing to do with the deaths. Ashley Connor, Vince Riley, and that poor child… I am glad you saved her, you know. Inheritance or no inheritance, I’d never have given my consent to harm a child.” She paused. “I really hope you believe me.”

“Somehow, I think whether or not I believe you comes second to whether or not the law believes you. They’re the ones you have to prove it to.”

“And I will. I just… wanted you to know, that’s all.”

“And now I do.”

“Good. Well, goodbye.”

She hung up without waiting for me to respond. I turned to the Sheriff who was still standing shoulder to shoulder with me. I’d been holding the phone out so that he could hear both sides of the conversation.

“What do you figure that was all about?” I asked him.

He chuckled. “I kind of figure she wanted to set you straight before you got around to aiming a Karma spell at her. Word on those hemorrhoids has gotten out on the street, I’m afraid. You just can’t keep something that good to yourself. And no, I wasn’t the one to leak it, either.”

I grunted. Hadn’t thought of that, but he was probably right.

“I have to ask, though, do you believe her?” he asked.

Thinking back to our little meeting at the Flour Pot, I shook my head. “No. Not really. She was far too ready with a rock-solid alibi for Ashley’s death. And far too smug about it too.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m thinking the same thing. Just for the record, I’m still trying to tie her into it, but right at the moment, it isn’t looking good. It would take Kramer turning against her, and right now he’s counting on the Fontaine fortune to cover his legal expenses.

They will start mounting up pretty darn quick."

Then he caught my look. "And no, I don't think you need to level a spell at Maude. Let me take care of this one, okay?"

It kind of went against the grain, but I nodded. "For now, anyway. If you can't find some way to hold her accountable, that might change."

"Fair enough." He hesitated. "About our normal date night..."

"If you have other things to do, I'd understand. You did just get a ton of stuff dumped in your lap."

"No, it isn't that." Another hesitation. "I want to take you out, Opal. Not my place. Not your place. Out."

Oh.

It took me a minute, but I finally agreed. I just really hoped he knew what he was doing.

AFTER HE LEFT, KIMBERLY came back to lay baby Pearl down. I could tell she had something on her mind.

"Just spill it, already, before you burst."

She got Pearl settled in first. Then she stood and looked at me before going over to her purse and digging out an envelope.

"All this about wills and estates and everything really got me to thinking." She was talking very quietly. Part of that was not to wake up the now napping baby Pearl. But another part, I could tell, was because she was nervous. "I've had a will drawn up, and I want to show it to you. So you can be prepared if anything ever happens to me. And to make sure you're okay with it."

Then she handed me the envelope and ducked back into the shop. I swallowed as I looked down at it. This was big. And something I should think about doing too. I wasn't getting any younger.

The will wasn't long. A single sheet. Basically, she left everything she owned, little that that was, to be divided evenly between Mason and baby Pearl.

But the next line was the one she'd wanted me to know about.

'In the event of my death preceding the eighteenth birthday of my youngest child, Pearl, I hereby state my sincerest wish that custody of both of my children should be granted to their Godmother, Opal Ravenswind.'

I was having trouble seeing through all the darned water in my eyes. The will ended shortly after that. It wasn't like Kimberly had a complicated estate to settle. But there was another paper in the envelope.

That's the one that made it official. I was now the Godmother of two wonderful children. I'd like to say that I immediately went in to

give Kimberly the enormous bear hug that she deserved, but I didn't.

It took me a few minutes to stop the water leaking from my eyes first.

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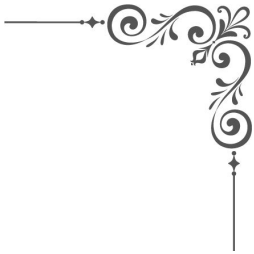

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Chapter 25

I'll admit the sheriff changing our normal Tuesday night routine bothered me. But my heart beat a little easier when we ended up at Callie's Kitchen. Her bed and breakfast might not be doing such a bang-up time this time of year, but her Tuesday and Friday night suppers were a big hit. My eyes widened when I saw the number of cars in the small lot.

"There'll be a waiting list for sure."

"Got it covered. We're expected." We walked in and Callie and Tory met us at the door. Callie still had her apron on. "I can't stay long, but I wanted to thank the two of you again for everything. Now, follow me to your table."

If I'd expected her to lead us to the main dining room, I'd have been disappointed. I wasn't. Instead, I was amazed.

The beautiful sunroom had been transformed. Into something a witch just might find even more beautiful. The full moon was at the top of its glory, filling the small glass space with soft, glorious moonlight.

And right there in the center of the space was a table set for two. Complete with flowers and candlelight.

My smile was heartfelt. "This is incredible, Orville. Callie. Thank you."

Callie grinned at Orville. "No need to thank me. This is all his idea."

He took my arm and lead me to the table. No need for us to order. Two plates loaded down with steaks, baked potatoes, and grilled asparagus were waiting for us. The steam was still coming off the food. The two of them must have had this timed right down to the minute. It wouldn't have been easy to pull something like this off.

We took our seats. And yet Callie still stood there, beaming down at us. "I was going to wait because I didn't want to take away from your night out, but I just have to tell someone before I burst." She lifted Tory into her arms. "I believe the two of you have met my daughter?"

I didn't stay in my seat for long. My arms were around the two of them in record time. "It's official?"

She nodded, tears—happy ones—filling her eyes. "It's official. No

one can take her from me now."

"Are you going to come forward on... the other thing?" Orville asked, with a side glance at the now squirming Tory.

Callie took a deep breath. "Yeah. I think so. And before you go thinking bad of me, I don't want the money. But the thought of it going to Maude... after all she and Teddy did... it just doesn't seem right to let it all go to her." She gave Tory a last squeeze and then let her down. "It'll be going in a trust fund, and I have a good feeling that most of it will go to charity, eventually. But that will be up to Tory when she is old enough to decide things like that. It isn't my money, after all."

"The courts might think differently, you know," Orville said softly.

"They might, but I don't. And that's what matters in the end." She stepped back. "Enjoy your meal. Let me know if there is anything you need."

She left with Tory in tow, and it was just the two of us. And the moonlight. You just didn't get any more romantic than that.

Which had me decidedly worried. So I did what I usually did when I was worried. I changed the subject.

"I heard they transferred Kramer over to your jail today."

"Yup. And I'll make dang good and sure he gets what's coming to him too. The man won't be seeing freedom any time soon. Not for as long as he lives, if I have anything to say about it."

"Well, with a murder and an attempted murder against him, I'm hoping he'll get life for sure."

"Anything else you have to say, Opal?"

I thought hard, but I couldn't come up with a danged thing. And believe me, I tried. I was that afraid of what was coming next.

"Well, I was going to wait until after we finished eating, but I don't think I can wait that long. I don't think you can either." He stood and walked over to stand by my chair. Then he pulled a small box out of his pocket and opened it even as he fell to one knee.

"Opal Ravenswind, High Priestess of the Gemstone Coven, and a personal favorite of the Goddess herself... will you marry me?"

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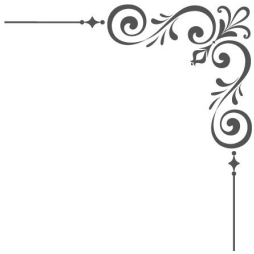

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Witch of a Sister

Witch Reborn 2

By Belinda White

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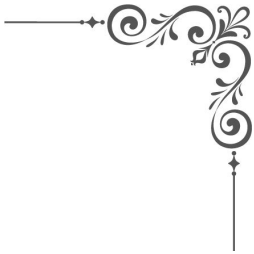

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WITCH OF A SISTER

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Chapter 1

I TOOK ANOTHER GLANCE at my books, but nothing needing to be done magically appeared. A glance behind me showed a nice little stock of ready-made spells and potions for our Goddess-loving clients, thanks to a week of my sister Sapphire's help.

Drumming my fingers against the desktop, I thought hard. There had to be something left to do other than just sit here and think about... things.

Where was the tourist crowd when you really needed them? When you needed the distraction from a worrisome dilemma?

What dilemma?

None other than an offer of marriage from the love of my life. I have not a single doubt in my mind that there isn't another man on the face of this earth that I'd rather spend my golden years with than my love, Sheriff Orville Taylor. But it just wasn't that simple.

Being tied to me in the public eye? Not a good thing for a sheriff up for re-election next year. I've tried to get that across to him. I mean, up until a few nights ago, I thought we were both on the same page there. Turns out, we were in totally separate books.

A baby giggle brought my eyes down to baby Pearl. She was currently sitting at my feet in her little bouncy chair. When she saw she had my attention, she pointedly glanced over to the one plant in the whole back room of my shop. A small pot of rosemary.

I stared at the plant for a minute, trying to figure out what was fascinating baby Pearl so. Nothing odd about it that I could see.

"What are you trying to tell me, baby Pearl?"

She took a deep breath, then looked at the plant, me, then the door. This non-communicating stage must really be driving the old soul in the tiny body bonkers. But it would just be too weird for a four-month-old to carry on conversations, now wouldn't it?

Especially when my Macaw familiar wasn't around to relay her words. Mom always did have a knack for communicating with animals, especially the ones we used as our familiars. Once the magic started passing through them, I guess it left them more receptive to someone with Mom's unique talent.

And in case you haven't guessed it yet, that old soul in little baby Pearl? Yes, that's my mom. And no, baby Pearl's mother doesn't know that yet. But as Pearl's powers start showing more, that will have to

change. I'm really hoping Kimberly can handle it.

My biggest worry was that Kimberly wasn't a witch. Not a drop of magic in that poor woman. But there was a whole lot of love and determination. Good makings of an ideal mother, if you ask me. The Goddess must have thought so too.

As if my thoughts drew her in, Kimberly ducked through the curtains leading into the front of the shop.

"People do know we're open today, right?"

I sighed and nodded. "One would hope so. But with all the nasty weather we've been having lately, they just might be out taking advantage of a fine spring-like day." I say spring-like, because even if that darn groundhog was right this year, we still had a few more official weeks of winter. I glanced out the small back room window. That's when baby Pearl's message finally got through to me. "With us being so slow, you think you could handle the shop on your own this afternoon?"

Baby Pearl started in with a long string of baby words and held her little arms out to me just in case I wasn't getting her full meaning. She wanted to come too.

"I'll take Baby Pearl with me. The other kids too, if you want." I hesitated. "I'm thinking maybe I need to restock my supply of magical ingredients. Sapphire and I went through a bunch last week."

"Not a problem with me at all. It's dead up there." She thought for a minute. "I know you'd want Nancy because she needs to learn these things too. But are you sure Mason wouldn't be a bother?"

I laughed. "That boy is never a bother. Maybe a bit trying at times, but then aren't we all? Why don't we leave it up to him?"

She grinned at me. "You doing that gathering in the woods behind the farmhouse?"

"Yup."

"Hm. Stay in a dusty old secondhand shop or have a day out and about foraging in one of his favorite spots in the world? Yeah, I'm thinking that isn't really a choice."

"My shop is not dusty."

"Not with me around, it isn't."

It took both of us working together a full ten minutes to get all three kidlings ready to go out the door. But it was worth it. If I'd gone alone, I'd have been alone with my thoughts. Not what I wanted right now at all. Besides, Kimberly could do with some time for herself too. Yes, she'd still be running the shop, but on a slow day like this, that didn't require all that much effort.

For once I was even happy that little Mason kept up a steady stream of conversation, even if it was a bit one-sided. Conversations usually allow others to speak every now and again too. Not so much

with Mason when he's excited about something.

And he was excited about the upcoming spring festival at their school. Having a festival on the way would be enough to excite any six-year-old. But what had him going wasn't so much the festival food, games, or even the prizes. No. It was the talent show.

He and Nancy had both decided to enter. Him, as an amateur magician. And Nancy—Goddess help me—with her ventriloquist doll, Sassy. I still had nightmares about that thing being in my house.

Still hadn't forgiven my sister for giving it to her, either. She'd pay for that, eventually. I'd see to that. Helping me catch up with potions and brews only went so far.

The shop wasn't far from home, so we were there in minutes.

"Run in and put your stuff up in your rooms. Then come back down and meet me at the back door."

The kids ran up the stairs, and I took a minute to change baby Pearl and get her situated in her wearable harness. I hadn't tried it going into the woods yet. I was really hoping I hadn't bitten off more than I could chew here.

That path up the hill had some pretty darn steep spots. Hard enough for a witch without a good-sized baby strapped to her. I looked her in her baby eyes. "It sure will be nice when you get around to walking and talking, you know."

She blinked at me. I took that as agreement.

WHEN WE CAME BACK DOWN off the hill, the kids were almost as loaded down as I was. We'd had a very successful gathering session.

If you're thinking late winter wouldn't be a good time for gathering, you'd be wrong. Thanks to the good Goddess, my woods were full of harvestable ingredients every season of the year. The items I gathered differed, of course, depending on the time of year. That made gathering times in each and every season a necessity.

Little Mason once again proved himself to be a valuable member of our little family. That boy could shimmy up a tree faster than my niece, Amethyst. And trust me when I say that's impressive. Amethyst was good. Mason was better.

Maybe we should arrange a little climb-off in the near future. With the massive amount of power that the Goddess had seen fit to give to Amie, it might do good to put her in second place for once. Everyone needed a little humility.

My cell phone beeped as I was settling baby Pearl into her swing to give my poor back a break. The kids dumped their bags on the kitchen table and headed for the stairs at a dead run.

"Shower first, then play," I called out after them.

“Can I take a bath instead?” Mason asked. I knew what that question was all about. He had an entire fleet of bathtub boats.

“All right. But get clean first, then set a timer and get out of the water ten minutes after that. Deal?”

“Fifteen?”

Oh, Goddess, not another little negotiator. I’d had enough trouble raising my daughter Ruby. That girl negotiated everything.

“All right, but not a second longer.”

Nancy grinned back at me. “I’ll time him, Auntie.”

I almost forgot about the cellphone beep. Well, technically, I did forget. Right up until it beeped at me again. Glancing at the screen, I saw that I had three missed calls.

Please, Goddess, don’t let it be Kimberly needing me. I’d left my phone on the kitchen counter while we went up the hill. There hadn’t been any need to take it. The little outdated phone that I clung to keeping like my life depended on it wouldn’t get a single bar in those woods.

I flipped the screen to open the call list. Not Kimberly. But almost as bad. Maybe worse, in one way. It was Orville.

Even though I hate to admit it, even to myself, but if it had just been one missed call, I’d have been tempted to let it ride. He’d really put me under a lot of mental pressure with his proposal of marriage. The man needed to give me some space to think.

But if my man called me three times in fairly rapid succession? Something was up. He just wasn’t the needy type.

I pressed to return the last call, my breath firmly in place in the chest with my rapidly beating heart. Please, Goddess, let him be okay.

“There you are,” he said by way of greeting. “I’m going to buy you a new phone, Opal. One that has a chance to pick up bars, even in that backyard jungle of yours.”

I took a deep breath. If he was talking about my outdated phone, then he was okay. “I’ll have you know my little jungle is up to that challenge, Orville. But you can come test your fancy-schmancy phone up my hill any time you like.”

“Count on it, but be ready to eat some humble pie when I do. My phone is state of the art.”

“Sounds like a battle of nature versus technology then, doesn’t it?” I was betting on my Goddess and her nature any day of the week.

He chuckled. “Trust you to look at it that way.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t ring me three times to talk to me about upgrading my cell phone, Orville.”

“No, I didn’t. But I’m having issues with the reason for my call. It isn’t an easy one to make. You know how I feel about you getting involved in investigations, right?”

“You’ve made your feelings on that matter perfectly clear on many occasions, Orville. So, yes, I know your feelings. But I’m not doing anything of the sort right now.”

“I know. That’s why this is so hard. Could you meet me at the old Grayson farm?”

My curiosity was definitely up. But I had lots of questions. “And how does me meeting you factor into the whole me getting involved in investigations?” Color me confused.

“I need a witch consultant on this one.”

My eyebrows flew upward of their own accord. Orville was asking for my help? As a witch? That had never happened before. And we’d been friends a very, very long time.

Glancing over at the small pendulum clock on the wall, I bit my lip for a minute, thinking. “I have the kids right now. I’d have to drop them off with Kimberly at the shop, and it would take me a while to pack them all up to get there. Is this a rush kind of thing? If it is, I can have Kimberly close the shop and come home.”

That would be a heck of a lot faster than getting three kids ready to go. And lucky for us, we’d both driven to the shop today, as I had been planning to let her and the kids leave early today, anyway. No need for all of us to waste a fine Saturday like this one. I felt kind of bad that I’d been the one to leave early instead.

“No need for you to lose profit over this, Opal. Just get here as soon as you can. No real rush. It’s nothing life-threatening. More of a puzzle that I need help with.” He paused for a few seconds. “Of course, sooner would be better than later.”

He disconnected the call. I stood for a minute staring at the phone. He’d been very enigmatic about the whole thing. What kind of case? What kind of puzzle? At this point, my curiosity really couldn’t go any higher.

A decision in place, I dialed the shop. Kimberly answered on the first ring.

“Did the sheriff get hold of you? He’s been trying for the past hour.”

“Just got off the phone with him. How’s the shop? Any busier than earlier?”

“Nope. Not a single bell ring in the past hour. Only three visitors all day. And only one that bought anything.” She hesitated. “It’s unusual for a Saturday. Do you want me to close up early and come home?”

That’s one of the things I loved about Kimberly. You didn’t have to explain every little thing to her. The woman was great at just taking the facts and reaching a logical conclusion. A lot like me in that way, I thought.

“That would be lovely, dear.” And then, just because I had to tell someone or bust…

“The sheriff needs my help with a case.”

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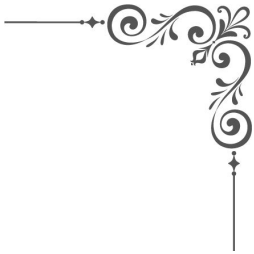

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Chapter 2

The Grayson farm was pretty much as far as you could get from my little farmhouse and still be in Wind's Crossing. Or at least the town's domain, anyway. The farm was way outside city limits. But it was still in the county, so that meant my man was in charge of any investigations there.

He had been pretty closed mouthed about what he needed my consultation on. It had my curiosity in overdrive. Unfortunately, miles are still miles, and even with the boost that Kimberly coming home early gave me, it still took me a good forty-five minutes to pull up into the farm's long drive.

When I finally reached the house at the end, Orville was waiting for me. He was sitting in the swing on the small front porch. All alone.

A quick glance around didn't show any other cars than just the two of ours, either. It would appear we were alone here. And just when I thought my curiosity couldn't go any higher.

He stood as I approached. "Thanks for coming, Opal." He hesitated. "I guess it would be best if you'd just follow me."

I did. We wound up standing under a very tall tree. Orville stopped and looked up into the top of the giant.

"Anything strike you about this tree?"

My brows furrowed, and I gave the tree a good once over. Walking all the way around it, I studied it closely. Finally, I shook my head. "Not that I'm seeing. Should something stand out to me?"

Orville scratched his chin. "Amie's dang good at climbing trees, right?"

My eyes went back to the tree and up. The first branches were about ten feet off the ground. "She is. But I would seriously doubt anyone's ability to scale this tree without some dang good equipment." Then I looked at him. "Mind telling me what the devil is going on here?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Actually, that's what I'd really like to know too." He pointed up into the tree. "See that broken branch up there?"

I followed the path of his pointed finger. "Yes."

"Well, old man Grayson was found up there this morning by his son."

My eyes traveled back to the branch of their own accord. "Old Mr.

Grayson is, what, about a hundred years old?"

Orville grunted. "Not quite, but he's well past the eighty-year mark for sure." He wasn't looking at me. That couldn't be a good sign.

"Pardon the pun, sheriff, but I'm going to go out on a limb and say you don't know how he got up there. Didn't he tell you?" Then I looked again at the broken branch and had a horrible thought. "Is he okay?"

"He will be." He gave a small bark of a laugh. "I guess it'll take more than a fourteen-foot fall to make more than a dent in that old coot. He did break his arm, though. His son took him to the hospital to get x-rays and a cast."

"Lucky man. But how did he get up there?"

Finally, Orville looked at me, the color rising in his cheeks. "He swears he doesn't know. He says that he and some friends had a bit of a jamboree out here last night. Guitars, banjos, the whole works."

"And probably more than a fair share of whiskey and moonshine being passed around, if I know Mr. Grayson."

"That'd be my guess as well. Although, he wouldn't own up to the moonshine part of that. I have yet to find that still of his, but I don't doubt for a minute it exists. Too many people in town talking about it not to."

"You think maybe somebody waited until he passed out drunk and put him up there as a joke?"

He swallowed. "That would have been my first thought, yes. Even though that would be an awful rotten thing to do to an old man. I mean, that fall could have easily killed the man if he had landed wrong. With his lifestyle, he has to have a whole passel of guardian angels standing at the ready."

"You said would have been... what makes you think different?"

Orville pulled out his cellphone. "That case with Valerie a while back. When we found her body, she had a spell mark on her. Now I know that mark didn't have a thing to do with her death. Your karma spells don't work that way. But Old Mr. Grayson? Well, he had something on the back of his neck that looked an awful lot like a spell mark to me."

He held out his phone with a picture on its screen. I took the phone and studied it. "That looks like a spell mark, all right." I hesitated. "You think that mark has something to do with all this?"

Another lifted shoulder and he was back to not looking at me. "I can't believe I'm going to ask this question, after all the years I've known you and your family, but here it goes anyway." He took a deep breath. "Is it possible for one of you to fly on a broomstick?"

If he'd expected me to laugh and deny the possibility, he was vastly disappointed. I was quiet for a minute, considering how best to

word my response.

"Possible, yes. But not just any witch could pull it off. It would have to be one with substantial power and control over their element." Like my mom, for instance. Not that I was saying baby Pearl was up to this. Not yet, anyway.

When Mom had discovered that levitation spell of hers, the very first thing she'd used it on had been a broom. Even with her power, it had taken her a good amount of practice to ride the dang thing. Sometimes you just have to invest in the classics. Mom was like that.

"So, we're talking about an elemental, then. That narrows it down quite a bit, doesn't it?" He reached out and took his phone back, glancing at the screen yet again. "Don't suppose you recognize that spell mark?"

"I do not." I paused. There was only so much it was safe to tell Orville, even if he was my man. For instance, the whole thing about having a council of witches overseeing the daily lives and magic of all magic holders. That was kind of a secret we held pretty close to our hearts. Something the rest of the world didn't really need to know about.

"I should be able to find out the origination of the mark for you though. It might take a day or two."

I was sure the witches' library held a catalog of all active spell marks. Of course, that would be my second choice for information. It wasn't all that quick of a trip to the library.

Patricia Bluespring was much closer. She was one of the lead enforcers of the magic law. If any single witch would have magical signatures memorized, it would be her.

Plus, she lived on the same estate as my daughter and Amie. A little visit couldn't hurt. With all the trouble those two could get into, it would be prudent to check in on them every so often. They weren't the best at calling me when trouble comes around.

Seems like lately, that happened a lot in my family.

"I know I say this a lot," Orville said. "But sooner would be better than later. I need to know what I'm dealing with here. I don't want that spell mark to lead me in the wrong direction." His eyes were back on that branch. "This isn't just some harmless practical joke. It could have turned out to be murder. We got lucky this time. Might not next time."

"I fervently hope there is no next time."

"As do I, Opal. As do I."

WE PARTED WAYS AFTER that. Orville to check in with his office, and me to head back home. I waited until I got back in my tiny little

living space before I called Patricia.

For once, I had the place to myself. There was a note on my closed apartment door that told me that Kimberly had taken the kids out for Carney's. She promised to bring me back a slice.

My stomach grumbled at the thought. It was going on supper time, now that I actually stopped to think about it. And that tiny little sandwich I'd had for lunch really hadn't gone all that far. I was running out of fuel.

That trip up the hill and back carrying baby Pearl had burned a heck of a lot more calories than I usually use in a given day. Shoot, maybe even for an entire week. I needed more of that.

I let the thought of all those extra calories burned off sway me into allowing myself a brownie. It would be my second of the day, and I tried to limit myself to just one. That was hard for me. But now that I had a reason... why the bloody heck not treat myself?

Chewing that first delicious bite slowly, I pulled up Patricia's number on my phone. I hit the button to put the call through even as I swallowed.

"Patricia Bluespring speaking."

That was Patty all the way. Formal to a fault until she knew who she was dealing with. She must not have my number saved in her phone. I'd like to think we were past that stage of formality.

"Hello, Patricia. It's Opal Ravenswind. How are you this fine evening?" It was always nice to lead with a small pleasantry, I thought.

"I am well, Opal. Is the same true of you and yours?"

Well, given her close proximity to my daughter and niece, I kind of thought she knew the answer to part of that better than I would. "I'm well. Hopefully, that is true of the others in my family too." I paused slightly. Surely that was enough pleasantry. I was just opening my mouth to voice my request, when she beat me to the next line.

"That's good. I'm actually glad you called. There's something I need to talk with you about. I'm not quite sure yet, but it might turn out to be council business." A longer pause. "I'm not comfortable talking about it over the phone. But you should know that it concerns a member of your family. Could we meet?"

That one little bite of brownie turned to a solid, uncomfortable stone in my stomach. I'd had my reservations about moving Patricia and her tiny home onto the kids' new place, but doing so seemed to solve a lot of problems for them, so I'd kept my trap shut. But if Patricia had learned Amie's little secret—or maybe not so little secret—then we could be in for a whole passel of trouble.

Amie hadn't asked to be a Light Witch. The Goddess had bestowed that power on her for a reason. And I really didn't think that reason

was to be locked up by the witches' council for having 'more power than it was safe for one witch to have'. Personally, a part of me thought that rule was in place just so the higher up council witches would have a steady source of power to draw on.

Yes, I was a council witch. But that didn't mean I always trusted the council's mode of operation one hundred percent. I sure as heck didn't when it came to Amie's freedom being taken away because of a gift from the Goddess herself.

"Opal?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "Are you free now? I could be at your place in about half an hour."

"That would work. Oh, and Opal? As this may turn out to be council business, it needs to stay between the two of us. No matter what. Do I have your word as a Ravenswind that you won't share what I'm going to discuss with you?"

Double drat. This was sounding more and more serious. But what could I do? She had me over a barrel here. I wasn't comfortable keeping secrets from my family. Well, secrets not involving my love life, anyway. But I desperately needed to know how much she knew.

And, even more importantly, what she intended to do about it.

"You have my word." Now, please Goddess, let me keep it.

Because when it came right down to it, I'd protect my family at all costs. Even if that meant breaking my lifelong streak of keeping my word.

Family was everything.

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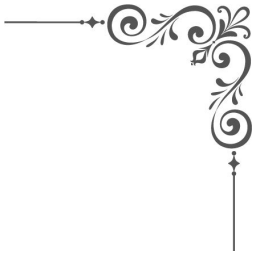

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Chapter 3

I was on pins and needles all the way to Patricia's house. It was the first time I'd visited her since they moved it. Lock, stock, and barrel, as they say.

She'd had a nice little set-up where the house had been previously. This one was even better.

More room to roam. Especially as the girls really didn't mind if she crossed over onto the property that they still kept the rights to. They owed Patricia. She could have taken the entire estate and kicked them out.

When all was said and done, the individual they'd originally bought the estate from hadn't really had the right to sell it. That right should have been Patricia's. She could have taken it back for herself. All of it. But she hadn't.

I liked to think that meant Patricia could be won over to our side of the whole Light Witch thing. But I just wasn't so sure that would be the case.

If there was one thing that Patricia believed in more than magic, it was following the rules. Even when the rules turned out to be wrong.

Pulling off to the side of the driveway in front of her house, I got out, pausing briefly to admire her new landscaping. It looked good. The small flower bed lining the front of the house was actually a tiny version of a witch's garden. But then, it would take a witch to know that. The flowering plants would be lovely on their own. The fact that they produced spell ingredients was merely an added bonus. Of course, they weren't to the flowering part of the seasons quite yet. But I could imagine their beauty in the late spring and summer.

And yes, I knew that I was less admiring the landscaping and more procrastinating the dreaded conversation. I was also trying to get my wits about me. I didn't want to be so on edge that I let out more than what Patricia already knew.

That could happen if I wasn't careful. And this was too important for that kind of slip up on my part.

Probably wondering why I hadn't yet knocked, Patricia opened the tiny front door on her tiny house and looked at me.

"Lovely little garden you've got here," I said, putting off the inevitable a few precious more seconds.

“Thank you. I try. There’s a bigger version in the back. I’ll show you later if you want. Of course, it will be far more impressive in a few months.” Then she stepped to the side of the doorway. The message was clear.

It was time.

The inside was pretty much exactly the same as on my last visit, even though the house had then been many miles away from its current location. They’d done a good job moving it.

“Who would have thought you could just pick up a whole house and move it like this?”

She smiled at me. “I have to admit, I had my doubts. But the movers were great. Only had to pack the breakable stuff. They said I didn’t even have to do that, but I like to err on the side of caution.”

Yeah, that was part of what had me so worried.

Patricia motioned over to the sitting area. I debated between the love seat and the chair. Then I settled down into the chair. I rather thought I needed the space to myself.

She poured us each a fresh cup of coffee from a warming pot on her small kitchen counter, then sat them on the small coffee table between us.

I reached over and took a sip. The day had just enough of a chill to it that the warmth felt good. And yes, it might also have been one last-ditch effort at procrastination.

“I never thought to ask you why you called me,” Patricia said slowly. “Sorry about that. I’ve been rather preoccupied with this other issue, I’m afraid. What was it that you wanted?”

And there she was handing me yet another opportunity to put off the conversation, but I’d reached my peak of all that. If I didn’t get this over with soon, I was half afraid my poor heart would up and give out on me.

“We can deal with that later. Family matters first.”

“Ah, yes. I kind of figured that would be your answer.” She stood to retrieve a couple of envelopes from her desk in the corner. Then, after a very brief hesitation, she handed them to me. “These were left in my mailbox. I checked for fingerprints. There were none.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You know how to do that?”

She nodded. “I do.” She gave me a sad smile. “I do have a past, you know. Part of that past included a brief stint in law enforcement.”

The other eyebrow joined the first. How had I not known that? But thinking about it, that little piece of information actually explained a lot about Patricia. How she went into the council’s enforcement group so readily. Why she believed in following the rules, no matter what. I understood her a bit better at that point.

“What made you leave it?”

Patricia shrugged. “I’m not totally sure, really. I guess I just got tired of the politics.”

Thinking back to Orville and the issues he might have if we did come forward with our relationship to the public, I could understand the whole politics in law enforcement thing. That would be a tough thing to handle.

And in case I hadn’t mentioned it before, my family weren’t the only ones with secrets. Patricia had one too. She was a werewolf. I think that probably factored into the political angle of things. Some people were really funny about people who were different from them. Especially if that difference involved sprouting fur and fangs.

Didn’t matter one whit to me. She was a good person... and a gorgeous wolf.

I looked down at the envelopes now in my hand. “What are these?”

“Open them and see for yourself. And you should know that I’ve personally verified what the notes say. They are accurate.”

Opening the first of them, I pulled out a single sheet of paper. The writing was in the form of block print letters. And in pencil, rather than ink. That was rather odd.

Then I read the words, and the fact that the author had used a pencil rather than a pen no longer mattered. I felt greatly relieved, and massively worried, all at the same time.

This wasn’t about Amie at all. That was the relief part.

The worry part came when I realized that the family member affected was my sister, Sapphire. In a not so round-about way, that is.

It has been brought to my attention that you might be the person to contact with information of a witch behaving badly. If not, it is my sincere hope that you will pass this along to the correct person.

I’m quite sure that witches would have some kind of organizational body to handle rouges. At least I do hope that is the case.

Because it is my fear that I know of just such a rouge.

Archimedes Mineheart Senior.

Please see the enclosed news clippings. I think it would be of great interest to you if you took a closer look at these happenings.

The note wasn’t signed. I looked closer at the envelope. Two small newspaper articles were inside. I pulled them out and read them. Nothing serious, but at the same time, rather worrisome. Especially after my recent visit with Sheriff Orville at the Grayson farm.

These stories were similar. Nasty pranks that could have gone horribly, horribly wrong.

Swallowing, I opened the second envelope. Another newsletter clipping. Same type of story too. The accompanying note was shorter this time.

Please do something before he goes too far.

A lot of people would ask why the author of the notes hadn't gone straight to the police if they had insider information like this. Not me. I knew why.

For one thing, the police really didn't like to acknowledge that witches existed at all. And they really, really didn't want to acknowledge that some of the said witches actually had genuine power. It had taken power to pull off these stunts. At least, it sure looked that way on the surface of things.

I was betting I knew what tied them all together too. Something else that law enforcement, other than my own Orville who was special in that regard, wouldn't take seriously.

A tiny little spell mark.

I took two deep breaths before pulling out the picture of the spell mark Orville had found on the back of old Mr. Grayson's neck. I'd swung by his office on my way to pick it up. No sense in hiding it from her. She'd likely be getting another envelope tonight with the news of this latest event.

Patricia still hadn't said a word. Silent as the grave.

Looking down at the picture in my hand, I grimaced. But I still didn't hand it over. I was having problems with putting what might be one more nail into Archie's magical coffin. Especially as it would appear there were already three solidly in place.

"I don't suppose you'd happen to have a picture of Archie's spell mark on hand?"

She nodded, then pulled out a drawer in the coffee table. Funny. I hadn't seen that drawer before. Probably a reason for that. Especially considering what she pulled out.

The sketchbook wasn't an overly large one, but it was nicely bound in leather. The type a professional artist might use.

One more thing I didn't know about Patricia. That's when I realized that for an unofficial member of our newly formed Team Destiny, we didn't know a lot about this woman. Other than the fact that she's both a witch and a werewolf. And that werewolf part of things was a fairly recent news flash.

Once we were past this latest hurdle, I thought it was high time we got to know each other a bit better. Maybe bring in the whole team on it. Well, the whole getting to know each other, not this thing with Archie.

She flipped to a page in the book and turned it to me. A simple faded yellow circle with a dark blue triangle inside. If one didn't look at it too closely, one might mistake it for a bruise. Yet another reason the police wouldn't be the ones to handle this.

I glanced down at the picture of old Grayson's neck. It was a match

all right. It kind of made me proud that my Orville had caught it. The other investigators had missed it entirely. Just showed me yet again how important it was to keep Orville in his position of sheriff. We needed a man that didn't let big clues like this slip past them.

Of course, the downside to that was when the clues led straight to family.

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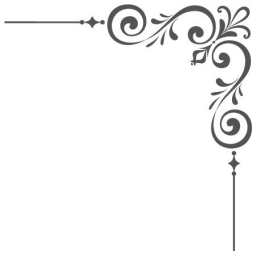

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Chapter 4

It took a lot of persuasion on my part, but I finally convinced Patricia that the right thing to do was to lay all this out to Archie and Sapphire and see what they had to say.

Not that my sister was in on the whole thing. Other than by being married to Archie, I mean. That was way too much involvement to suit me as it was.

She was quiet on the drive over. Too quiet.

See, Sapphire wasn't Archie's first wife. She was actually his third. I'd never had the pleasure, or displeasure according to Sapphire, of meeting wife number two. But wife number one? Well, she was sitting right next to me in the car.

"Tell me straight. Does this sound like Archie to you?" After all, she knew far better than I ever would.

She shook her head. "No. Not at all." She turned her face to the window. "But people change, you know. I really don't know the man that well anymore. He's so different from the man I married all those years ago."

Yeah, well, he was probably happier for one. I didn't think their marriage had ended all that well. Divorce is never entirely a pleasant thing for either party. And I think he and Sapphire dated back a long, long time. The marriage was kind of new, but I didn't think the love part was.

Well, that was it. My whole conversational plan shot down the drain. Needless to say, the rest of the drive was spent in an uncomfortable silence.

I don't know what Patricia's mind was doing, but mine was busy worrying about what my sister had gotten herself mixed up in. And just what Archie was up to.

We hadn't called to let them know we were coming. This was going to be a kind of surprise attack, if you will. We didn't want to give them time to prepare their stories. Not that they would, but still. If it made Patricia happier, I was okay with the surprise thing. Even if it did go against my grain a tad.

Normally, I wouldn't have a problem with a drop-in visit. Not to my sister anyway. But the timing wasn't the greatest. It was getting close to meal time. Sapphire, being the little homemaker that she is,

would most likely insist on feeding us. And somehow, considering the situation, that simply didn't seem right.

I pulled off their circular drive and looked over to Patricia. "So, are you okay if I take the lead on this?"

She looked at me. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but are you up to it?"

I hated it when people told me to not take something the wrong way, and then they went and said something offensive. I mean, what is the right way to take something like that?

"I wouldn't have asked to take the lead if I wasn't, now would I?"

She gave a half-hearted shrug. "Suit yourself."

That still didn't really answer my question, but I was too antsy to get this over with to press the issue. I stepped out of the car and made my way to the front door, with Patricia only a step behind me.

When Sapphire opened the door to find us standing on her front porch, she broke out in a grin. "Oh, thank the Goddess! I do hope the two of you are hungry. I hate to eat alone."

One step into the house and the smell of my sister's lasagna hit me. And my stomach had an instant response to the smell too. Come to think of it, that one small bite of brownie hadn't gone all that far.

"Why are you eating alone? Where's Arch?" Patricia asked, looking around her.

At first, I thought that maybe she was just taking in the grandeur of the place. Then I remembered that she had once lived here too. Most likely, she was comparing things now to the way they were in her day.

How does one go from living in a mansion like this one to a teeny, tiny house? That couldn't have been easy.

Then again, she seemed to really love that little home of hers. Who was I to judge for that? She just might be happier there.

"He's working late again, I'm afraid. This case he's working on is taking up all his waking hours, it seems. He's too wrapped up in it personally, I'm afraid."

Patricia and I shared a look. This wasn't good. Archie was a homebody. Or at least he had been since marrying Sapphire. For him to be spending so much time away... well, it didn't bode well for him. Not with the evidence of foul play with magic building against him. I'd kind of hoped that Sapphire would be his alibi, and we could put this entire thing to bed early. Looked like that would not be how this went after all.

"What case would that be?" I asked.

"The Tomlin one, dear. The young boy that was caught pretty much red-handed in that string of bank robberies. Do you recall that?"

I did. "Archie agreed to represent him? Why would he do that?

Everyone knows the boy is guilty as sin."

She gave me a weak smile. "I'll admit it isn't like Archie to take on a case where the client's innocence is in question to him. But this is different. Archie owes his father a favor, and the man called it in."

"Must be one heck of a favor."

Sapphire didn't seem all that certain. "I wouldn't know. Archie refuses to talk about it. Kind of upsetting, actually. Before this, I honestly believed we didn't have any secrets from each other."

Patricia snorted, then quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, Sapphire. I know that you and Arch are much happier than the two of us ever were, but that man has skeletons in his closet that you wouldn't believe."

Now both of us were looking at her. She swallowed. I could only assume she was regretting her words.

"Do tell," Sapphire said, arching an eyebrow at her. "And I'd greatly appreciate it if you could start with the Tomlin skeleton. That's the one that is bothering me the most at the moment."

Patricia looked at her for a minute, then looked at me with a shrug. "What do you think?"

I knew what she was asking. Did we take the time to have dinner with Sapphire and appease her curiosity? Or did we head on into Oak Hill to see Archie?

That last option was the one I really wanted. If only I'd known he was working late, that would have been the one I went with for sure. But as it was, we were here. And leaving Sapphire without a detailed explanation wouldn't be easy.

Taking a deep breath, I looked Patricia in the eyes. I fully expected her to buck on my decision. Not that she really could object too much. I was the one with the car keys, after all. "I say we have dinner. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

The argument never came. Instead, Patricia smiled at me. "Then it looks like we're on the same page. I could definitely eat." She glanced over at Sapphire. "And that smell is driving me near insane."

"I don't usually discuss business over dinner, but I think we can dispense with that nicety just this once. Agreed?"

Thank the Goddess for small favors. I had been afraid my sister would hold fast to her rule, and I wanted to get on to Archie sooner rather than later. "Agreed."

It didn't take long to fill our plates and sit down at the smaller table in the kitchen. With it just being the three of us, there wasn't any need to go into the formal dining room for the meal. Besides, eating in the kitchen was just, well, cozier. Easier to make good friendly conversation.

Which I fervently hoped was what we were about to partake in. At

this point, it could go either way. I really wished I knew Patricia a bit better right about now.

Sapphire let us take a few bites first. Then, apparently, she just couldn't stand it any longer. "So, Patricia, am I to understand that you know what the deal with the Tomlin favor is?"

Patricia swallowed the bite in her mouth and reached for a drink to chase it down before answering. I knew a delaying tactic when I saw it. She didn't want to answer.

"I do." She paused. "But to be honest, I'm hesitant to discuss it with you. Surely Arch has his reasons for not doing so? Especially if he shares so freely with you?"

Sapphire gave her double arched eyebrows. "I thought we had an agreement here. Food for talk."

"True, but I don't recall stating what that talk would be."

The eyebrows stayed up.

Finally, Patricia blew out a breath. "Here's the thing. If I tell you, then Arch will know that I told you. And things are rocky enough between us as it is. You know that. We've only just reconciled our friendship in the last year, thanks mostly to Opal, here. I don't want to risk that."

The eyebrows lowered, but Sapphire didn't seem happy about it. "And if I promised not to tell him I knew?"

"He'd know. Trust me. That man has his ways of knowing things."

"So, you aren't going to tell me?"

Patricia shook her head. "If I thought that it would help the situation, I would. Friendship or no. But I just don't see what knowing this tiny little secret could do for you. It was a long time ago, and truthfully, I don't think it was all that big of a deal. Not nearly so big as what the men seem to think it was."

"Then why, when my husband shares everything else so freely with me, does he clam up every single time I mention the Tomlins?"

"That's between you and Arch, Sapphire. You do know that, right? Do you really think it would be right to go behind his back and ferret the information out of me?"

Sapphire looked down at her plate. "If it meant I could help him, then yes, I do think it would be right." She hesitated and her voice quivered just the tiniest of bits. "I think Archie might be in trouble. And I think it involves the Tomlins." She raised her eyes to mine, our gaze meeting across the table. "Why else would he risk his perfect court record for a boy he has to know is guilty?"

I took a couple of deep breaths as silence fell. I mean, what else was there really to say after that? And Patricia didn't seem to be budging on her not telling the secret. That left only one solution, in my mind.

“Eat up gals. We’re taking a road trip,” I said.

“We are?” Patricia asked.

I nodded. “Well, me and Sapphire are, and since you don’t have a car here, I kind of thought you might want to join us.”

“How nice of you,” she said. There was more than a hint of sarcasm in her voice. “Can I take a wild stab at the destination? Mineheart Law, correct?”

“Yup. A man just doesn’t have the right to keep secrets from his wife. Especially if said wife just happens to be my sister. I respect your decision not to talk, and in a way, I even applaud it. This needs to come from the man himself.”

“I agree.”

I glanced over at Sapphire, who still hadn’t said anything. “Are you in?”

Even as I watched, her face set into a stubborn expression that I remembered so well from our younger days. She was so in.

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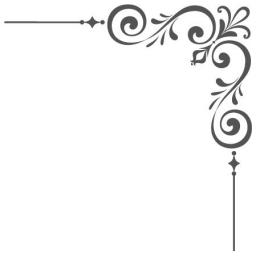

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Chapter 5

The offices of Mineheart Law were every bit as impressive as Archie's mansion of a home. And with good reason. This was what paid for all of that luxury. Sure, the Minehearts had some old money stashed away for future years, but the brothers were doing pretty dang well at not having to touch it, according to Sapphire.

I'd been there during the day and seen with my own eyes how busy the place was. The money flowed through this office like water. It wasn't a cheap affair to hire a Mineheart lawyer. They were that good. Sapphire hadn't been exaggerating about Archie's perfect court record. The man had never been beaten. And in all the years he'd been practicing law, that really said a lot about his legal prowess.

Made me wonder even more what this darn secret could be too. Must be a pretty dang powerful one for Archie to risk a lifetime record. And with all the evidence stacked against young Tomlin, I really didn't think even he stood a chance of winning this one.

Sapphire let us in with her key, and we didn't make it far before we heard raised voices coming from Archie's office. We stopped where we were and listened. It might not have been the right thing to do, but it's what we did, anyway.

The second voice belonged to Merlin, Archie's brother and partner. "You need to end this. Now. You know as well as I do that boy robbed those banks, and you're risking this firm's very reputation by defending him. I don't care how good a friend you are with his father." There was a pause. "Don't tell me you think you can get him off, either, because you're good, but no one is that good. So why are you risking everything for an outcome that's written in the stars already?"

Sapphire took a deep breath and walked over to the office door. Me? I'd have waited to hear Archie's response. But then again, I didn't have to go home to live with the man afterward.

"I'd like to know the answer to that myself, Archie."

Merlin whirled around to face us at the sound of Sapphire's voice. Then he turned back to Archie.

"I had no idea they were here. I swear."

"Of course you didn't," Sapphire said. "We only just got here. So, if it will ease your minds any, we didn't hear much of the argument."

Then she looked her husband dead in the eyes. “But for what it’s worth, I’m on Merlin’s side on this. I think you need to tell us why you’re doing this.”

“So do I,” Patricia said.

Archie looked at her. “You haven’t…”

“I have not. But I have to say, I don’t understand why you are keeping this from your wife.” She glanced at Merlin. “And apparently your brother as well. You realize you are all partners, right? Don’t you think they have a right to know?”

He swallowed but finally gave a small nod. “So be it.” His eyes met Sapphire’s gaze and then Merlin’s. “But be forewarned. Telling you will change nothing. You won’t talk me out of this.”

“Stop beating around the bush and tell them already,” I said, losing my patience. “We have other, more important things to discuss, but we aren’t going to get to them until we clear this up. So get on with it.”

Sapphire gave me an odd look. But the ball was in Archie’s court.

“You probably know that Joshua Tomlin and I grew up together. The two of us and Martha Donaldson. We were mates, the three of us. Practically inseparable.” His fingers started fiddling with a paperweight on his desk. “When I turned twelve, I started coming into my powers. I was testing them out one day, something my parents had warned me repeatedly against doing by the way, and I started a fire.”

“Oh, dear,” Sapphire said. “Was anyone hurt?”

He shook his head. “No. It was out in the middle of the woods, but it could have gotten bad quick. If Martha and Josh hadn’t been there, it would have. We got it put out in pretty short order, but it took everything we had to do it.”

“But anyone in their right mind would have helped a friend in that situation. Especially a good friend,” I said, still not seeing the relevance to the current situation.

“They would have and did,” Archie said. “But afterward, I wanted to show my gratitude in a more visible way.” He fingered a small scar on the palm of his hand. “I swore to both of them that if they ever needed the favor returned, they had but to ask it. Then we sealed the bargain by becoming blood brothers and sister.”

“You made it a blood oath?” Okay, so that changed things.

He nodded. “The whole blood brother thing came from some book one of us was reading at the time. But it was kind of cool. It connected us even more than we’d already been connected.”

Sapphire was frowning. “And why did you feel you couldn’t tell me this?”

Archie looked up at her. We were still standing, and he was still sitting behind his desk. “Because you would have called me silly to

risk my career for an old called in favor. You would have tried to stop me."

I could feel my sister bristle even with Patricia standing between us. "I most certainly would not have! You made a blood oath, Archimedes. Those are not to be taken lightly."

His eyes widened. "You'll stand behind me on this?"

"Of course." She hesitated. "But I'm afraid Merlin has an excellent point. Why even bother to come to you with this? Does Joshua think you can get his son off on a technicality or something?"

It was a long minute before Archie answered. As we all wanted to hear his answer, we waited. In dead silence.

"Because he never asked me to win this thing. I think he knows that even I have limitations there, although I'm doing my level best to find a way out for him. There doesn't seem to be one."

"Then why come to you and ask you to risk your reputation for this? Doesn't sound like the kind of thing a friend would do," Merlin said.

Another hesitation from Archie, but finally his shoulders dropped. "This can't go farther than this room. Are you all agreed?"

Only after each and every one of us agreed did he go on. "He came to me for two things. The first I did to the best of my ability. I got the judge to lower the bond amount to get Flynn out of jail. The second, I'm working on, but it isn't going well. That is to delay the trial for at least another month."

The room got quiet after that, as we all took in exactly what that meant. "He's going to do a runner," Patricia said, giving voice to what we all were thinking.

"I have absolutely no proof of that. At all," Archie said. "But yeah, I think that is the plan. Not just Flynn either. I think the entire family is bailing with him."

"Hm. If they bail, that would still be a bit of a black eye on the firm, but it wouldn't technically be a court loss, now would it?" Merlin seemed to brighten a little.

At least until I hit him on the arm. Not lightly either. "There are more important things at stake here than a perfect court record."

Archie gave me a sad smile. "There are few things in life more important than that blasted record to my brother."

"So sue me for being proud of you. My perfect record went down in flames less than a year into my practice. I kind of want to see how long your streak can go. That's why I hate this so much. But at least now, I understand a little better."

That statement seemed to startle Archie. "You do?"

Merlin took a deep breath and nodded. "As Sapphire said, you made a blood oath. Honoring it isn't really up for debate, now is it?"

I glanced around the room. Everything seemed to be out in the open, so now seemed as good a time as any to get to the second reason for us being there. “First of all, is there anything we can do, right this minute, to help you honor that oath?” I asked.

Archie shook his head and closed the file in front of him. “I’m afraid not. I’ve just about reached the end of my rope on this one. But I’ll try again tomorrow.” He stood and grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair. “Let’s go home.”

“Actually, I have some rather urgent business I’d like to talk about first. And here is as good a place as any to do so.”

Sapphire just looked at me. “I knew that lucky visit from the two of you had a purpose.”

“It did. But it involves Archie, not you.”

Sapphire stood a little taller. “If it involves Archie, it involves me.”

I blew out a breath. “Okay, I’ll give you that. But it directly involves Archie, and only indirectly involves you. Now can I please go on?”

She made a little motion for me to continue.

Staring straight into Archie’s eyes, I asked him flat out. “Would you please tell me why your spell mark is on the back of old man Grayson’s neck?”

Archie did a double-take. “What?” Then glanced at Patricia and back to me. “What the devil has that got to do with this?”

“Nothing, but I still need you to answer.”

“Okay,” he said, drawing out the word for all it was worth. “Old man Grayson served with my dad in the Army. Saved his life and thusly mine too, as I hadn’t yet been born. Dad made me promise to continue the protection spell on Grayson once he passed. I renew it every month.”

Patricia and I spared a glance. Okay, one down.

“And why was your spell mark on Willis Brown’s car?” Patricia asked. Okay, so much for letting me lead. But then, she knew the details of the other cases, and I didn’t. The news clippings hadn’t mentioned the spell marks.

Archie’s eyebrows furrowed. “Because his mother asked me to do a protection spell on it. She didn’t like that he was driving a foreign car.” Again his gaze went from Patricia to me. “Now before you ask me any other questions, I think I’d like to know what this is all about.”

“We’ll have a couple more questions to ask you to be sure, but it sure as heck looks like you’re being framed, Archimedes,” I said. “One last question, if you don’t mind. Who would know about all these spells you’ve been doing for friends?”

He stared at me for a minute, but I didn’t budge. “No one. I don’t go broadcasting what I do or there would be a line outside my door.

I'm in the business of law, not spellcraft."

Well, that was a puzzle.

"Do you record them anywhere?" Patricia asked, one step ahead of me.

He nodded and pointed to a shelf on the far wall. An empty shelf.

"What the devil?" He strode over to the shelf, glancing around the floor beneath it.

"Who the bloody heck took my spell journal?"

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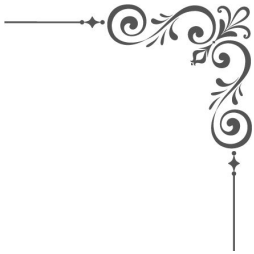

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Chapter 6

"I will take a wild stab at this and guess that book isn't warded just to you," I said. The resulting influx of color to Archie's cheeks gave me the answer to that one. No. It wasn't.

"I didn't feel the need to ward the book," he said, bristling. "It's in my own bloody office!"

"Only now it isn't, dear, is it?" Sapphire said, gently tapping on Archie's arm. "Do you have any idea at all who might have taken it?"

"I do not. I don't meet with clients here in my office. I use one of the conference rooms."

I bet that good old Joshua met with him right here in this very room, but I kind of figured everyone got that. Besides, before I could point that out, Archie gave me a stern look of determination.

"I think it's about time the two of you come clean. What the bloody heck do you mean I'm being framed? Framed for what?"

All eyes were on us, and Patricia caved first. "Maybe we should take this to one of your conference rooms, Arch? Standing too long after a heavy meal isn't always a good idea."

Within a matter of minutes, we were all seated at a long and—as always when it came to the Minehearts—impressive oak table. At least the executive style leather rolling chairs were comfortable. Patricia was right on this one. Sitting down was a very good thing after eating a good helping of my sister's lasagna.

Merlin went to the fridge in the corner and brought back an armful of bottled waters. Once each of us had taken a sip to gather our thoughts, Archie turned again to Patricia. "I'm still waiting, just so you know."

She nodded. "I know." After the briefest of hesitations, she pulled the envelopes out of her bag and passed them across the table to him. "See for yourself." Sapphire scooted her chair closer, and Merlin stood behind him to better see the contents of the packets. Patricia and I sat right where we were. We already knew what they held.

When Archie's eyes finally raised to meet ours, they looked worried. "Someone is targeting people from my spell journal."

"It certainly looks that way, doesn't it? Which brings us back to sister's question. Who could have taken it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I truly don't know. That's my office, and when

I'm not there, it's locked up tight."

"What about your cleaning crew?" Sapphire asked. "You're still using Fran and her daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes. And they have keys to my office, but they are good people. I can't see them doing this."

A little light bulb went off in my head. "Wait a minute. Fran Goldman?"

Archie nodded. "Yes. Is her last name important?"

"Oh, I think it could be," I said. "Fran's son, Mark, is the bank president over at the Union Valley Bank. Last I heard, after Flynn and his buddy robbed them, the bank immediately went under investigation. Mark is in more than a bit of trouble himself right now. I can't think that Fran would be happy about you defending Flynn."

And the fact that Mark had taken a runner didn't help the investigation any, either. It wouldn't surprise me to find out that he'd been involved in the whole thing. But mothers don't tend to think like that when it comes to their own children. I'm sure in her mind, Flynn was the only bad guy on the scene,

"She's not happy about it at all, and she's let me know about it too. But I can't see why that would lead her to take my spell journal and then go around doing these kinds of things." He motioned to the articles now spread out on the table. "Truthfully, I don't think she's capable of such things. Her beef is with me, not them, and these people could have been hurt."

Maybe Fran wasn't capable, but there was always her daughter too. And Shyla had been known to pull some mighty well thought out pranks in her day. Pranks that had gotten her into trouble more than once.

Why she would try to frame Archie with them, though, was beyond me. At least right now. But it had been a long day. It was quite possible that I was missing something.

Patricia leaned back in her chair. "Okay, everyone. I think we've done what we came to do. And, for now anyway, I'm convinced that Archie is innocent in all this." She gathered up the articles and envelopes and put them back into her purse. "I think I'm ready to go home now."

That made two of us. I looked over at Archie before I stood. "I want you to think long and hard about any meetings you've had in that office of yours lately. Or any times when maybe you had people in the building and left your desk for even a brief restroom break. Jot the names down. I think we'll need to take a closer look at all of them."

I took a deep breath and then spoke my fear. "I could be wrong, but I think whoever is behind this is just getting started. And

eventually, it's going to end badly."

I DROPPED PATRICIA off on my way home. Sapphire had left with Archie, so that was one less stop to make. Still, by the time I made it home, it was almost bedtime for all the little kidlings.

The downstairs was deserted, so I sat my bag and keys on the entry table by the door to my apartment and then climbed the steps. As I climbed, a strange and unfamiliar voice trailed down past my ears. The shiver that immediately chased down my spine told me exactly who that creepy as all get out voice belonged to. Sassy, the ventriloquist doll.

Oh, I knew that technically it was Nancy's altered voice, but she was very good at making it sound wooden. Just like what one would expect a creepy as all get out doll to sound like.

I really had issues with Sassy.

Issues enough that I almost turned and headed back downstairs. But it was too late for me. I'd been seen.

"Auntie Opal! Come and watch my new magic trick!" Mason was more than a little enthusiastic when it came to his little magic tricks. And no, there wasn't a single ounce of actual magic to the tricks at all. Which, by my way of thinking, made them even more impressive. The boy was getting pretty good at it too.

The only trouble with watching his new trick was going into the room where Sassy's voice was coming from. She'd been in the house for over a week, and I still hadn't had to come face to face with her. Looked like that time had come.

Squaring my shoulders, I stepped into the kids' playroom. Sure enough, Nancy and Sassy were sitting on a stool in the corner. Well, Nancy was sitting. Sassy was resting on Nancy's lap. Another shiver down my spine. I really wasn't handling this Sassy thing very well. But I had my reasons.

For what it was worth, the doll didn't look all that terrifying. Not much like the doll from my youth at all. The one that still to this day gave me the occasional nightmare.

I still didn't want her out of her case any more than was absolutely necessary, though. I wasn't about to take chances. And she was what she was, even if she wasn't quite as scary looking. Maybe, now that I thought about it, that made her even scarier. It was always the ones you didn't suspect, wasn't it?

This one had short, curly flame-red hair and honest to Goddess freckles. Almost cute. Almost. If I could get past the fear.

There, I admitted it. I was afraid of the dang thing. Happy now? I wasn't. Not by half.

“Give me a minute to get it ready, okay?” Mason asked.

“Take your time. I ain’t going nowhere.”

I stole another glance over at Nancy. She grinned and then lifted one of the doll’s arms to wave at me. I tried my darndest to stifle the shudder that followed, but I don’t think I was all that successful.

Nancy giggled. “Auntie, meet Sassy.” She looked down at the doll. “This is Auntie, Sassy. She’s also my mom now, but I still call her Auntie.”

That was something we’d never really discussed before. Her name for me. We’d settled on Auntie while the adoption work was still going through. Now though... well, Nancy brought up a good discussion point.

“Just for the record, I’d be okay with Mom too.”

Nancy’s smile faded as she tilted her head at me. “You would?” Then she hesitated. “Would Ruby mind, do you think?”

“Why on earth should your sister mind if you want to call me Mom?”

She swallowed, staring hard into my eyes. “Do you think she really thinks of me as a sister?” Her voice was so low and hopeful, I could barely make out the words.

“Well, of course, she does. Because that’s what you are, you know. And I have the paperwork to prove it too.”

“That’s, well, kind of cool actually. Are you sure you wouldn’t mind?”

I knelt down in front of her. “I am your mother now, Nancy. I might not have given birth to you, but I couldn’t love you any more even if I had. You’re my daughter, and I’m your mom. Forever.” I paused a beat. “You can still call me Auntie, if that feels right to you. But I just wanted to let you know that Mom works for me too.”

She nodded. “I’ll think on it, okay?”

“You do that. Either way you decide, I’m fine with.”

“I’m ready now,” Mason said.

I turned to find the boy with a bath towel safety-pinned around his neck, cape style. I had to bite my tongue pretty dang hard to keep the laughter in.

He had pulled out the small round table to the center of the room. On top of the table was a hat. A very suspicious-looking hat, but a hat.

“And now, the great and powerful Mason will attempt to pull a bunny from this simple and very ordinary hat.” He reached down and carefully picked up the hat, turning it toward me so that I could see it was, indeed, empty. Then he sat it back down, stretched out his arms, and picked up a little stick that I was assuming was his magic wand.

Waving the stick over the hat, he mumbled. “Abercadaber and kazam!” Then he laid the wand down and reached into the hat. It took

him a second or two, but when the hand came back out of the hat, it was holding a bunny.

A tiny stuffed bunny, but a bunny.

I clapped and laughed. “Well done, Mason!”

He grinned at me. “Thanks, Auntie. Want to see it again?”

“I think it’s about time for bed, Mason, don’t you?” That wasn’t me talking. I glanced back to the doorway. Kimberly was standing there smiling at him. “You were much better that time, Mason. Your practice is helping.”

“Can’t I practice a little more? We don’t have school tomorrow. Please?”

She looked at me. “What do you think, Opal? Another half-hour?”

“Okay by me. A boy’s got to practice.” I winked at her, then turned back to Mason. “But about that cape…”

His grin faded pretty quickly. “Yeah, I know. But Halloween is too far away, and all the capes online are too expensive.” He grimaced. “Or too cheesy looking. I want to look professional.”

Kimberly gave a sigh. “You know I’d make you one if I could, sweetie, but Mommy isn’t good at sewing.”

I scratched my neck, thinking. “Might be time to bring out the old sewing machine in the closet downstairs. I think I could whip you up a cape before the big show.”

“Really?” Mason’s eyes brightened.

I nodded. “Yup. And I might just have the perfect material for it too. Leftover from a costume I made years ago for Ruby. There just might be enough for a cape. I’ll dig it out tomorrow, and you can tell me if you like it, okay?”

He ran over and threw his arms around me. “Thank you, Auntie!”

Reaching down, I ruffled his hair. “It’s the least I can do to help out my godson.”

The kids went back to practicing their acts. I know I should have stayed to watch Nancy work with Sassy. That would have been the motherly thing to do. But I wasn’t quite ready for that yet. Baby steps.

Kimberly followed me back downstairs to fix baby Pearl’s nighttime bottle. “Everything go okay with the sheriff?”

What could I say to that? “I guess so. It looks like someone might have something out for Archie. We’re going to have to look into that. But that’s for tomorrow. No one died, or found a body lying around, so that’s something, anyway.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way. I think this family has had enough excitement over the past few months to last a lifetime.”

She wasn’t wrong. Being the Goddess’s favorites wasn’t always a peaches and cream kind of thing. It came with its own special little flavors of danger and stress too.

Kimberly laid baby Pearl down on her little play mat and went to pull a bottle out of the fridge. “I hope you don’t mind, but I invited Gray over tomorrow. He’s promised to help Mason with his act.”

Uh-huh. And I was pretty sure that part of the visit would be used to get to know Mason’s mom a bit better too. But that was okay with me. Gray seemed like a good guy. I almost want to tack on for a werewolf to that sentence. But that just doesn’t seem right. He was a good guy. Period. Or at least he seemed to be. Nothing had come up to say otherwise yet. And from my one encounter with his wolfy side, he was a good werewolf too.

Of course, I had no proof that the wolf had actually been Gray. But then I didn’t really have proof that the world was round either. Still believed it, though.

“You do get that this is your home, right? You can invite whoever you want over. Whenever you want. I trust you.”

She smiled at me. “Thanks. But I still like to run it by you first. But you weren’t answering your phone earlier, so I took a chance. I just wanted to make sure it was okay with you.”

“And now you know. I’m okay with Gray.”

Man and wolf.

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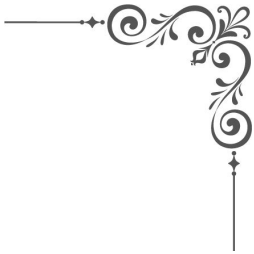

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Chapter 7

Sunday was the one morning every week we all got to sleep in. No school, no work, just a lovely day of rest and relaxation.

I just wish the rest of the world got that.

It was barely seven o'clock when my cellphone went off. I reached over and glanced at the screen. Patricia. I'd added her into my contacts last night. I liked to know who I was answering a call from.

"Please don't let this be bad news," I said. I'm not much of one for normal hellos and goodbyes. I liked to get right to the meat of the conversation. Especially this early in the morning and before I'd had my coffee.

"Well, it sure as heck isn't great news, I can tell you that."

I swung my feet over the side of the bed and sat up. "Okay, I'm ready now. What's happened?"

"Whoever is doing this has gone from notes in my mailbox to phone calls. My phone went off five minutes ago. If the caller is right, Opal, this one is bad."

I closed my eyes and said a brief prayer to the Goddess before asking the next obvious question. "How bad?"

"A barn burned to the ground. And, Opal? There were children in the loft when the fire started."

Oh, Goddess no.

"They got out okay. And with no major injuries too. Thank the Goddess they had a cool dad that had put in a zip line from the loft. If it hadn't been for that zip line, there would have been injuries for sure. Maybe even more than that."

Yeah, barn lofts could be pretty dang high. Old Grayson had been protected by a Mineheart spell, chances were good those kids wouldn't have been quite so lucky.

"We're still on the same page that Archimedes isn't involved, right?"

There was the briefest of pauses. "For now, yes. I really can't see Arch doing something like this. But Opal, just for the record, he didn't seem quite right last night, you know? He was... off... somehow."

"But not this off, Patricia. Not by a long shot. The caller give you the address to this barn?"

"Oh yeah, and something else too. They wanted to know when our

council would take action."

That made me sit up a bit straighter. "They mentioned the council by name? Could you tell anything about the caller? Was it a man or a woman?"

"Yes, and no. Yes, they mentioned the council by name, but no, they disguised their voice through some kind of device. Couldn't even tell if it was male or female."

"They're upping their game."

"Big time." There was a pause. "I'm headed over to the farm to see if I can locate that spell mark and maybe find something that will point in any other direction than Arch. You want to ride?"

"Am I coming to you, or you coming to me?"

"This one is on the other side of Oak Hill, so you might as well come to me."

"Think we should call Archie and see what he has to say?"

"No. Not until I know more. This has me really bugged, Opal. Why would the man be brazen enough to keep a spell journal out in the open like that? I know it was in his private office, but still. You don't just leave those things out like that. It doesn't sit right with me." Another, longer pause. "And I don't think it will sit well with the council either, should they become involved."

She didn't have to say the next sentence for me to get the point. Sooner or later, the council would find out, and then things would get tricky. We needed to solve this situation before that happened.

"I'll be there in half an hour."

Half an hour didn't give me time for a shower. They'd just have to accept me as I was. I gave my armpit a quick sniff and added deodorant, just in case. I'd for sure need it with what we were going into.

Then I threw on a pair of fleece-lined yoga pants and a long-sleeved tunic and walked as quietly as I could up the stairs. Lucky for me, I knew which ones creaked and which ones didn't. You learn these things pretty quickly when you live in a house as old as mine.

As I had thought, Kimberly was in baby Pearl's room, getting her dressed for the day. She looked up as I came in.

"I sure will be glad when Pearl learns the meaning of sleeping in."

I smiled at her. "She will. But it will take a few years. I'd take her, but I have to go out."

Her eyes widened. "Another call from the sheriff?"

"No, but just as bad. Witch business. And even worse, family witch business."

She nodded. "I see." She hesitated. "You know if I can do anything to help, I will, right?"

I nodded. "Thanks. But if you can handle the kids today on your

own, that's enough of a help right there."

"Not a problem. They're my kids, after all. Nancy is more grown-up than kid, you know."

Oh, I knew. But I was working on that. Everyone deserved the opportunity to be a kid. Even if that meant having a ventriloquist's doll. Even at the thought, I glanced over my shoulder toward the short hall to the kids' rooms.

"I'll have my phone with me. You run into problems here, call me."

"We'll be fine. Go on. But remember Gray will probably be here when you get back. We're doing a picnic lunch out by the meditation garden. If you get back in time, I hope you'll join us. You can invite the sheriff too, if you want. I will have plenty of food."

"Sounds good to me. We'll see how things shake out this morning."

Then I turned, walked back down the stairs, grabbed my purse and keys, and left.

THERE WERE STILL VEHICLES at the barn when we got there. The big fire truck had already left, but the fire marshal's SUV and a sheriff's vehicle were sitting in front of the barn.

Well, what used to be a barn. Right now, it was just a big pile of smoking wood. Not much had survived that one.

"Dang it," I said to Patricia. "I was kind of hoping the law wouldn't have been brought in already. I don't like dealing with the ones I don't know."

She grinned at me. "Don't worry. I've got this one. They know me."

That was news to me, but I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Did make me wonder how they knew her, though. Then I remembered her past. Once a cop, always a cop. At heart, anyway.

I followed her over to the men standing off to the side of the barn. They didn't even seem to notice our approach. That's where Patricia and I differed. She walked straight up to them. If I hadn't been following her lead on this one, I'd have checked things out first. Taken advantage of their inattention to learn as much as I could before they noticed I was there.

But when I saw the deputy's eyes light up when he saw Patricia, I realized that might not be an issue after all.

He held up one finger to her, then quickly finished his conversation with the other two men. After that, the fire marshal headed back to his vehicle and left, and the other man—I'm assuming the owner of the barn—started back toward the big farmhouse we'd passed on the way.

The deputy walked over to us. "Hey, Patty. It's been too long."

"Yeah, we need to do something about that. You need to come

over and see my new digs. It's pretty sweet."

"If that's an invitation to come over for some of your awesome meatloaf, I'll take you up on it."

She laughed. "I guess I can throw a meatloaf and some mashed potatoes into the offer."

"Any chance of some of those cheesy stuffed mushrooms too?"

Patricia tapped his arm. "Don't press your luck."

A quick glance between the two of them showed me that there was definitely something between them. Maybe not as well-formed as what was between me and my sheriff. But something. For one thing, Patricia looked a lot younger than her years right now. Love, or shoot even the beginnings of true like, can do that for a person.

He glanced behind him at the barn. "I take it you're here for this and not to renew our friendship?"

"Nothing wrong with killing two birds with one stone, is there?"

He grinned at her. "Not in my book." Then he looked at me and held out his hand. "I'm Deputy Steve Brighton. And you are?"

"Opal Ravenswind, from Wind's Crossing."

His eyebrows raised. "I believe I've heard a thing or two about you."

"Word about me does tend to get around." Especially as my sister was married to a prominent member of Oak Hill.

"So, what can you tell me about this?" Patricia motioned toward the barn.

The deputy scratched his head for a minute, staring at the smoke still rising from the wooden remains. "Not much, I'm afraid. The fire marshal will be back with a team later on today, or maybe even tomorrow, once things cool down here a bit. We'll know more when they're done."

"The kids are all okay, though, right?" Sorry, but my priority would always be children above all else.

He nodded. "Scared and shaken, but okay." He shook his head. "If it hadn't been for that zip line, that sure as heck wouldn't be the case."

"Do you think the fire was an accident?"

That was rather smart of Patricia to word it that way. I'd have been more likely to ask if they knew who set it. But then, we might just know more than they did at this point.

All sign of a smile was now gone from his face. "No. We don't." He motioned for us to follow him and walked around to the back of the barn. A little off to the side was a discarded red gas can.

He stopped us before we got too close to it. "Sorry, ladies, but that's evidence, and I can't let you closer than this. The sheriff has been delayed. I'm here to keep the scene undisturbed. I could use

some help putting up the crime scene tape, if you're up to it."

"I'll be glad to help you, deputy," I volunteered. Of the two of us, Patricia was the one with the most investigative experience. It just made sense for me to provide her with a bit of a distraction.

Of course, my offer of a distraction was wasted when she followed along right behind us. If we would be working together on this, we needed to work on our signaling process. Come up with a code or something to let the other know the plan.

Too late for that now. It did rather surprise me, though, when she pulled out a pair of binoculars from her trunk and put the strap around her neck. Huh. That was a good idea. With those, she could see that can up close and personal and keep her distance at the same time.

I was starting to have a very healthy respect for the woman. More than I had by her just being a council witch, which was substantial as it was. One didn't get on the council of witches easily.

While I helped the deputy string out the crime scene tape, I watched her walk around the corner of the barn out of the corner of my eye. Maybe she didn't get her signals crossed after all. A glance at the deputy showed me he wasn't too concerned with her disappearance. He seemed much more interested in pumping me for information about her.

"How long have you known Patty?"

I thought for a minute. "Going on a decade or more now, I reckon."

He nodded. "Are you friends or co-workers... what?"

"Friends mostly, but we do work together now and again."

"Don't suppose you'd want to tell me how you knew about the barn in time to get here before the sheriff?"

I looked at him. "Ever hear of a police radio?"

Not once did I say that we had heard of the fire on the police radio. Not once. I was merely asking an honest question. If he made the assumption that we heard it on a police radio, well, you know what they say about assumptions.

He grunted. "I see." He glanced back in the direction that Patricia has gone. "You happen to know if Patty is seeing anyone right now?"

I finished tying off the piece of yellow ribbon that I was working on before straightening up and looking him square in the eyes. "I kind of thought maybe the two of you might be an item."

He took a deep breath. "My work gets in the way a lot."

If he'd been going to say more, Patricia's appearance around the corner of the barn stopped him. She didn't look happy.

In point of fact, the woman looked downright worried.

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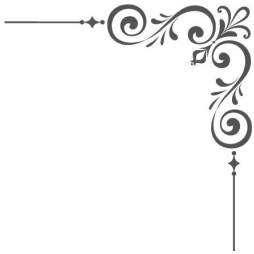

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Chapter 8

"We need to have another talk with Arch."

I looked over the car at her. "Okay. Want to tell me what you learned back there?"

"What do you think? I found another one of Arch's spell marks. In just about the worst place I could find it too."

I closed my eyes for a brief second. "Let me take a wild guess. His mark is on the gas can?"

"It is. And not a teeny, tiny one either." She hesitated. "If the council gets wind of this, Opal, they won't hesitate to pull him in until they can do a full investigation. I'm halfway tempted to take him in myself. Missing spell journal or no."

If Patricia was that close to doing it, then she was right. The council wouldn't hesitate. They didn't like to run the risk of rogue witches being out and about. Their policy was more of a contain the situation (and the suspected witch) first, investigate later. Sometimes, the investigation happened fairly quickly. Other times, it kind of fell through the cracks.

Not that we would let that happen to Archie, but still. The council's wheels turned slowly. And Archie would be in a magical limbo cell until those wheels reached their destination. However long that took.

It wasn't a good scenario.

"You think he'll be home today?"

I nodded. It was Sunday, and my sister was pretty adamant when it came to the whole one day of rest thing. Archie might be putting in all kinds of hours and working six days a week, but I was fairly certain Sapphire would put a stop to him working on a Sunday.

I hated to interrupt their one restful day, but priorities were priorities. I thought keeping Archie out of a limbo cell counted as a fairly big one.

"I'll call them and let them know we're coming."

"You think that's wise?"

I just looked at her. "What? You think he'll do a runner? From us? Come on, Patricia. You know better than that."

She shook her head and climbed into the car. "I'd like to say I do, but I've been surprised before."

Patricia didn't say if that surprise had come because of her investigative life or because of her marriage to Archie. Truthfully, right at this moment, I didn't want to know. I was that afraid it might be the latter.

And if so, I was that worried as to just what my sister had gone and gotten herself into.

Sapphire answered on the first ring. She seemed more than a little worried when I told her Patricia and I were on our way to see them.

"There's been another incident, hasn't there? With Archie's spell mark?"

I hesitated in answering. I'm an old-fashioned kind of witch. It had taken the girls years to get me to carry a dang cellphone. And even now, I still didn't trust having personal and confidential conversations over them.

"Yes, but we'll talk more when we get there. I'm guessing we're about ten minutes out right now."

"I'll throw together some eggs and sausage then. Drive safe."

WE WALKED INTO THE heavenly smell of freshly fried sausage and eggs. My stomach immediately reminded me I hadn't eaten yet this morning. Not even a cup of coffee, either. It wasn't very happy with me.

That didn't mean I was willing to go along with Sapphire's new rule of not talking business over meals, and I told her so.

She nodded. "Just this once, I agree."

We sat down, and I immediately started stuffing my face. As far as I was concerned, at this point, I would let Patricia take the lead. She and I were both on the council, but she was an enforcer. I wasn't. That made a difference. By letting her handle this, I was hoping to get the message across loud and clear to both Archie and my sister that this was a very serious matter.

Right now, they were dealing with Patricia who, for the most part, could be reasoned with. That would change if the full council got involved.

But Sapphire didn't even give Patricia a chance to start the conversation. She did. "Whatever it is this time, he has a rock-solid alibi. Me." She looked from me to Patricia and back. "Archie hasn't left my side since the two of you left last night."

Normally, with a witch, that assertion might not mean all that much. I mean, you can work magic spells and send them out into the world from the privacy of your very own home. Sapphire knew that too.

But this time, it did mean something. The fact was, someone had

to have been on the scene at that barn to pour that gas. If Archie was here, then that someone wasn't him. I glanced over at Patricia and saw her shoulders drop just that little bit.

Good. She got that too.

I continued to eat while she filled them in on the barn fire and the spell mark on the gas can. "I will guess you have a reason for that spell mark to be there?"

He frowned down at his plate. "I've only ever spelled one gas can that I can recall. And it wasn't for the owner of that barn. It was for old man Grayson."

"Why on earth would you spell a gas can?" I asked. So much for letting Patricia do this, but my curiosity was too high on this one. I hadn't been able to come up with a single workable reason to do that, and it was worrying me.

Archie took a deep breath. "Some kids were messing around out at Grayson's farm. One of them put sugar in his gas can. Ruined a perfectly good riding mower. He came to me and asked if I could put some kind of a warning on the can to let him know if someone had messed with it."

I looked at Patricia over the table. "Okay, so that makes sense. And we already know that whoever did this also had access to Grayson's farm, as they'd already visited it with one of their little pranks."

"I wouldn't consider it a little prank, Opal," Sapphire said. "Putting an old man that high up in a tree? Archie's protection spells are powerful, but not invincible."

"Sorry. I agree whole-heartedly. I guess in my mind, I was just comparing it to setting a barn on fire with kids inside."

Archie almost came out of his chair on that one. "There were kids inside that barn?"

Oh yeah. Patricia had left that little fact out, hadn't she?

His eyes locked on Patricia. "If that's the case, then this thing just got really serious, really quick." His face was a lot whiter than usual. "Please tell me they are okay."

"They are," Patricia said. "They got out and clear with only very minor injuries."

Archie leaned against the back of his chair and closed his eyes. "Praise be to the Goddess."

I pushed my plate away. I'd finished all the food on it, and I held my hand up when Sapphire started to dish me out some more eggs. "No thank you, Sapphire, I'm trying to cut back. That's hard to do with your cooking, though." I smiled at her, then glanced around at the others. "Eat up, everyone, we have a lot of brainstorming to do."

Being around Orville had taught me a lot of things. One of those things was to carry a notebook and pen wherever I went, no matter

what. That served me well now. I reached down into the bag at my feet and pulled them out. Then I uncapped the pen and wrote 'list of suspects' at the top.

"Okay, so we know that Fran Goldman and her daughter, Shyla, have reason to be upset with you right now, and that they have full access to your office and the spell journal."

Archie didn't look happy, but he gave me a nod. "We do, but I really don't believe either of them would do such a thing."

"Neither do I, Archie, but that doesn't matter right now. We need to list everyone that might have had access to that journal that also might have a reason to use it against you. We can't let our personal feelings into this. Everyone has to go on the list." I glanced around the table. "Agreed?"

Everyone nodded.

"Well, if everyone has to go on the list, then I top it," Sapphire said. "I have full access to Archie's office. I even have my own key and everything."

"Yes, but you don't have the whole reason to use it against him." I hesitated for the briefest of heartbeats, looking at her closely. "Do you?"

She smiled at me. "No, you have me there. Not a single one. So, I don't go on the list?"

"Not yet," Patricia said. "I'm with Opal on this. I think we need to start with access and a grudge. If that doesn't pan out, then we'll narrow it down a bit from there."

"So, Fran and Shyla. Who else?" I asked.

Archie didn't look happy. "You know I can't discuss private client affairs. It's a legality."

Patricia shook her head. "We aren't asking you to. Not yet, anyway. But if you have a client with a grudge, we still need them on the list."

I just looked at him. "You have a perfect court record. Why would you have clients with a grudge?"

He didn't say anything, but Sapphire did. "Maybe they had to pay a bigger fine than what they felt they should have. Maybe they had to plea out to a lesser charge. It could be any one of a number of things, dear." She paused, looking over at Archie. "It could also be any one of a number of clients that you turned down to take on the Tomlin case, too, you know."

He took a deep breath and nodded. "There are a couple that were very vocal about my choice on that. But again, they wouldn't go to these extremes..."

"You weren't listening, Arch. Opal said our personal feelings don't count for this list, and I agree one hundred percent. We need as

comprehensive a list as possible. So give us names already," Patricia said.

He did. We started at the table and then, once everyone else had finished eating, we all moved to the living room. We ended up with ten names of possible suspects.

Then I noticed that Sapphire had a very thoughtful look on her face. "What?" I asked.

"Well," she started, glancing over at Archie. "There was a young attorney a couple of weeks back, right before all this began in fact, that was very adamant about joining the firm. As a partner, no less. He didn't take too kindly to being told it was a family affair."

"Was he ever in your office?" Patricia asked, her sharp eyes watching for Archie's reaction.

"Yes. He was. Briefly."

"When's the last time you recall marking a spell in your journal? Or remember noting that it was still there? Before or after his visit?"

Archie rubbed his face. "I've been so caught up in this Tomlin case, that I honestly couldn't recall when I did my last spell. It's been a while. And as for how long the journal has been missing?" Another face rub. "I honestly couldn't even begin to guess."

Before I put my notebook away, I had a couple more questions to ask. "Whoever is behind this obviously knows you're a witch. Don't suppose that narrows it down any?" They all just looked at me. "Yeah, I kind of thought that was public knowledge, but I wanted to be sure."

"That brings up another point, though, Opal. The call this morning mentioned the council." Her sharp eyes went to Archie. "Any idea who on this list would know about the witches' council?"

He looked a bit confused. "None of them that I know of. I mean, it's not something we talk about, now is it?"

Well, that was that then. Eleven people to start with.

And time was wasting.

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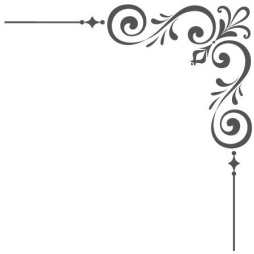

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Chapter 9

On the way back to Patricia's to pick up my car, I called Orville. I still hadn't invited him to Kimberly's impromptu backyard picnic. Good thing it was his day off and he didn't have any plans.

When I hung up from him, I glanced over at Patricia. "I'd be happy if you could come too, you know. We might have time to talk a bit more about what's going on."

"With the sheriff around? You really want to bring him in on this?"

I gave that some thought but finally nodded. "Orville is a good man to have on your side at any time. I'm thinking right now that could only be a good thing. Plus, he knows Archie too. I think it would be safe to bring him in." Not to mention the fact that as the investigating officer on the whole old man Grayson up in a tree thing, he was already in it to begin with.

She shrugged. "Your call, I guess. I have to admit, right now I'm more worried about the council than I am about the local law enforcement agencies."

"Yup. Another reason having Orville on our team wouldn't be such a terrible idea, in my opinion."

"I get that. If you want to fill him in, it's all right by me. But I think I'll give the picnic a pass, if you don't mind. My day's gotten off to a rocky enough start as it is. Need to go play catch up now."

Not sure that I believed her on that one. But then, I wasn't super relishing the idea of sitting outside freezing my buns off either.

When we got to Patricia's, I switched over to my car, and she went inside. It was still a couple of hours before the noon time picnic. Not really enough time to do anything on all this, and I was sure that even though Kimberly had said she had the food handled, that she could use a little help all the same.

I stopped by the market and picked up some charcoal, hamburger, hotdogs, and buns. It wouldn't take long to fire up the grill and throw some meat on it. Extra variety was always a good idea when it came to food. And besides, men had a tendency to take over the fixing of food if it involved a grill. That was a winning situation in my book.

When I walked in the front door, sure enough, Kimberly was in a state. Her hair was wild, baby Pearl was crying—something the child rarely did—and Mason and Nancy were nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, Opal! I’m so glad you’re home. Do you think you could watch the kids while I make a quick run into town? I totally forgot to get the hamburger for the meatballs. And I promised Mason!”

The girl looked close to tears. It had been a really long time since fixing a meal for a man had thrown me into such a tizzy. But not so long that I couldn’t recall the feeling.

I held the market bag up. “How much hamburger you need? I got three pounds of it right here. Thought we might fire up the grill and let the men folk help out a bit. Got hot dogs and buns too.”

She threw her arms around me. “Oh, Opal, you’re a lifesaver! That’s an awesome idea. I’ve got all the fixings for a nice big tossed salad, and I’ll only use about a pound for the meatballs. Will that give us enough for the burgers?”

I did a rough calculation in my head. “You got those teeny weenies to go with the meatballs?” She nodded. “Then I think we’ll be fine. Chances are the kids will mostly pig out on them or hot dogs and leave the burgers for us grownups.”

“I hate to say it, but I’ve never grilled before. Does it take a while to get the fire going?”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of time. I’ll go check in on the all too quiet upstairs and then get it started. Everyone’s coming at noon, right?”

“Yup. Orville too?”

“There’s food involved, right? He’ll be here.”

She took the bag from me and headed into the kitchen.

By now, baby Pearl had stopped crying, but I picked her up from her little playpen all the same. Just as I figured, there wasn’t anything wrong with her. She’d just been feeding off her mother’s emotions. She did need a fresh diaper, though. And maybe a little swing time while we big girls got things under control.

Once I got her changed and settled in her swing, I headed upstairs. Nancy and Mason got on together great. Much better than most real brothers and sisters ever did. But when the two of them were together and quiet? It was time to check things out.

“I still think I should be the one to pull the bunny out of the hat.” Mason’s soft voice came through the closed door.

Odd. Normally, the door to the kids' rooms was always open. I stopped before just walking in. After a moment’s internal debate about the issue of privacy for youngsters, I knocked. It was the only polite thing to do.

There was a shuffling sound inside, and Nancy called out, “Just a minute, please.”

Part of me wanted to try the doorknob. If the kids took to shutting their door, that was one thing. Locking us out? That would be another

thing altogether. But when Nancy finally turned the knob, I didn't hear the lock disengage first. Good. We were all on the same page here.

"Can I help you... Auntie?" That little pause in there let me know she was still struggling with what to call me going forward. She'd come to a decision soon. In the meantime, I wasn't going to press the issue.

I looked down at her. "Can I come in?"

Instead of giving me an immediate answer, she glanced behind her first. She must have been satisfied with what she saw because then the door finally opened all the way. I glanced around the room. Nothing on fire, anyway. That was always a good sign.

"What are the two of you doing? I'd have thought that you'd be down helping Kimberly with the picnic preparations."

Color flushed into Nancy's cheeks. "I offered, but she said she had it. And Mason and I needed to rehearse. Kim said we could try out our show for you guys. Well, what we've got finished, anyway."

Ah. Nancy moved and, sure enough, Sassy was sitting on one of the kids' wooden chairs, just like a real person. Somehow, her sitting up on her own like that just made things worse. Kind of like she was alive. If I wasn't so creeped out by the dang thing, I'd be feeling for a pulse. But no way was I getting that close.

Besides, did possessed dolls have pulses?

"Okay, then. I can help her finish up. But I think you two need to wrap up your rehearsal and clean up a bit. When you're done, come on downstairs. We could probably use some help to set up the gazebo."

Nancy nodded. "We have to set up the stage too." She looked at Mason, then at me. "You sure you will have time to make him a cape before the show? If not, I have some money saved up, but I need to order it soon so it will get here in time."

Oh yes, the cape. I turned a critical eye on Mason, looking the boy up and down. I just might have something that would work. And another few minutes wouldn't hurt on starting the grill.

I walked over to baby Pearl's room, Nancy and Mason following after me in curiosity. The pull-down stairs for the attic were in that room. I tugged on the rope and settled the stairs.

Mason's eyes got wide. "We have an attic? That's so cool!"

That got a laugh. The only attic the boy had probably ever been in was my sister Sapphire's. And mine was a far cry from hers. Mine was mostly bare wood, beams, and a couple of old pieces of broken furniture I always meant to have fixed. But there were also a few old steam trunks filled with some of the girls' old clothes.

I got the right one on the second try. Trying to keep the contents

as neat as possible, I riffled through the offerings until I found what I was looking for. When the girls were younger, they liked nothing more than to dress up as good, old-fashioned witches for Halloween trick or treating. The hats wouldn't be needed, of course, but the capes? They just might do in a pinch.

And they would save me time in making the cape I had in mind for the boy too. One of these would serve well as a base for it.

"Come here, boy." I held up one of the cloaks to Mason. The size was just about right to hit him mid-shin. That was a good length for a magician's cape, I thought. I handed it to him. "Try it on."

He wrinkled his nose. "It kind of smells, Auntie."

I smiled at him. "It won't after we wash it, sweetie. I just want to see if it fits you for now."

He still didn't look too sure about it, but he draped the cloak over his shoulders and turned to Nancy. "How do I look?"

"It's perfect!" Then she looked at me and then the trunk. "There isn't another one in there, is there?" Her voice didn't sound too hopeful of that being the case.

But then, she hadn't gotten to know the girls all that well yet. What one of them had gone as for Halloween, the other had followed suit. They were generally always a matched pair, those two. Still were, pretty much.

I reached in and pulled out the other cape and handed it to her. "I'm not sure ventriloquists wear capes, though, to be honest, Nancy."

She grinned at me. "Nope. But magician's assistants do." She put on the cloak and gave an experimental twirl. The material flowed out nicely. Then, of course, Mason had to give a twirl.

"Do I take that to mean the two of you are combining acts? You've given up Sassy to be Mason's assistant?" And yes, even I could hear the hope in my voice.

Nancy stopped twirling and giggled. "Not exactly. You'll see." Then she hesitated. "Since you don't have to make Mason a cape now, do you think maybe you could make Sassy one instead?"

Oh, Goddess. Now I would be sewing for the darn thing. But what I said was. "Sure. No problem."

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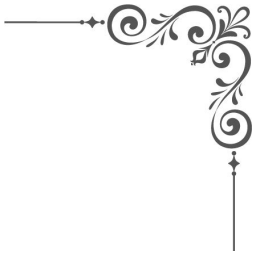

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Chapter 10

Once I got Kimberly calmed down and on schedule, things went smoothly. By the time our guests arrived, the grill was nice and hot and ready to go, and the hamburger was all pattied up and sitting on a covered plate with the hot dogs next to the grill. Ready for the men. I was fairly sure one of them would offer to fry them up.

The kids had done a good job setting up the gazebo, too, even if looked a bit gaudy for my tastes. A little overdone on the crepe paper, but they'd worked together and that was a good thing.

It was still early for outdoor picnics weather-wise, but the gazebo was ringed with plain benches for seating, and we had a portable fire pit that we placed at the center. I'd gotten that going while I worked the fire magic on the grill. And yes, just a touch of magic was involved. It wasn't a necessity, but it helped all the same.

Orville and Gray were both up to the challenge of grill master, so they decided to double-team it. The men were getting along famously, which in turn, eased some of my final lingering doubts on Gray. The sheriff was a darn good judge of people himself.

Part of their willingness to take over the cooking might just have been the warmth of the grill. The day wasn't nearly as warm so far as what the weatherman had promised.

But then, that's what made the event so special. It wasn't run of the mill. As we grow older, the old days tend to fade from our memories. At least the ones that all felt the same. The ones that were different lasted longer in our memory banks. An outdoor backyard picnic when it was still wintertime? That was something the kids were likely to remember.

I smiled over at Kimberly, who was supplying the men with veggies to add to the grill. She looked happy. The kids looked happy. The men looked happy. I'd call that a win.

She really was a great mom. The Goddess had chosen wisely on this one. I can't think of another woman that would do a better job at raising baby Pearl.

I could help, sure, and I planned to do just that. But the actual raising and being there for her? Kimberly was the one for that. I had no doubt that she'd be able to handle Pearl. And that right there was telling just how much I really thought of the girl. Raising baby Pearl

would not be a walk in the park, for sure.

Who'd ever heard of a four-month-old baby already coming into power? But I'd seen the signs. It was happening whether we were ready for it or not. Time was running out to have a long talk with Kimberly.

Once the food was done, I gave Orville a nod. "Why don't we let the younger folks have the gazebo, and you and I take our food inside?"

He grinned at me. "See? Great minds do think alike."

Kimberly gave me a worried glance. "You don't think it's too chilly out here for the kids, do you?"

"Not at all. The fire pit in the gazebo should keep you all warm enough. Old bones feel the chill more, that's all."

She glanced over at Gray and the kids already getting comfortable in the meditation space. "You know you're welcome, though, right?"

I gave her a quick hug. "I know, and I thank you for that."

As soon as we made it to the kitchen, Orville looked at me and chuckled. "Old bones, my fuzzy behind. I've heard the tale of you dancing up on that hill naked as the day you were born in the middle of December."

I returned his look with one of my own. "A good witch always celebrates the equinox in style. And besides, there was a huge bonfire involved, you know."

He nodded. "Oh yes, that was mentioned too. Otherwise, it might have been too dark for them to make out as many details."

I grunted. "We go up on that hill for a reason, Orville Taylor. It isn't our fault if wherever we go, dirty old men find a way to spy on us. I just got tired of moving the bonfire every month when it didn't really work, anyway."

Orville chuckled. "I know. Yet another joy of being in love with a witch." He started to say something but stopped himself.

Yes, I knew my week was running out. I'd be having to give him an answer soon. And just like that, the food on my plate didn't look nearly as appetizing as it had five minutes ago.

He must have sensed my change of mood because he changed the subject.

"You had any luck yet finding the source of that spell mark?"

When I didn't answer immediately, his eyes bore into mine.

"If I tell you, I want your word not to fly off and do something stupid."

He sat back in his chair and stared at me for a minute. I might have gone just a bit too far with that stupid thing.

"First of all, I'm not a man to fly off and do stupid things, and you know that. And second of all, we both know that one way or another,

you're gonna tell me."

Yeah, we did.

I took a long breath. "You want the story from the beginning or the short and sweet version?"

"Let's start with the short and sweet and go from there."

Personally, I thought that was kind of a waste of time, and I was right. As soon as I'd told him the mark was Archie's and why it was there, he wanted the rest. Any other lawman and I would have kept the other cases to myself. But this was Orville we were talking about.

I told him everything.

"So, what do you think?"

"I think someone is out to get Archie in a whole heap of trouble." He hesitated. "I know we've never really talked about it, but I gather witches have some kind of governmental order to keep them in line?"

"We do."

"Seems to me that's what this is about. I mean, finding a mark at every scene that leads back to Archie is bad, don't get me wrong. But it's magic. And I don't think the world is ready to put someone on trial for using magic. Most people are much, much happier just pretending that it doesn't exist."

I frowned at him. The man had a point. "You think this is all about getting Archie in trouble with the council?" As soon as I said the word council, I regretted it, but it was too late. It was out there.

Orville gave a slight shrug. "That's my first initial impression, anyway. What do you think?"

I took another bite of my hamburger and chewed slowly to give myself time to think. His thoughts made a lot of sense. And if he was right, then the suspect list might have just gotten bigger too.

Witches had spells. Merlin's good friend, Jack, was a master of the stealth spell. He could have walked into that office and taken that dang journal with Archie sitting right there at his desk.

But why? It's not like Archie was high up in the council. He was just another witch under its rule. Wasn't he? It might be time for another short conversation with Sapphire. I didn't want to miss something this obvious.

"That makes sense to a point. It would make more sense if he was high up on the board. But Archie isn't even a council witch. I'm not seeing a benefit to bringing him down in the council's eyes."

"Sounds like you have an enigma on your hands."

I grinned at him. "What is that? Your word of the day?"

"Don't knock it until you've tried it."

"Oh, I'm not knocking it. You're a very well-spoken man, you know."

"Thank you for noticing."

The silence that followed was easy going at first. A silence among friends that didn't feel the need to talk every second they were together. But ever so slowly, the tension started creeping back in. I could tell Orville's thoughts had returned to the deadline.

"We still on for Tuesday night?" he asked. He was going for a casual question, but there were lots and lots of unspoken undertones to it.

I nodded. "Don't suppose you'd agree to give me an extension to think on things?"

Orville shook his head. "I've already waited a lifetime, Opal. It's not that hard of a question, you know. Either you want to spend the rest of your life with me, or you don't."

Our gazes met over the table. "You know that isn't the issue."

"It is to me." He looked away. "I'm tired of living alone, Opal. I'm tired of being apart from the woman I love six out of seven nights. I'm tired of sleeping in a bed all alone. I'm tired of having to hide my feelings for you. I want more. Is that too much to ask?"

"No. It isn't." But that still didn't solve my issues. It just wasn't that easy to put the problem in a box. My gaze went out the kitchen window to Kimberly and the kids. "They need me, you know."

"They do. But this isn't about me taking you away from them. I just want a little more of the share, that's all." He hesitated. "We have a lot of options when it comes to new living arrangements." Another pause. "For instance, I could move in here for a few years. Until the kids got a little older."

Okay, so that surprised me. Just when I'd thought nothing the man could ever do would surprise me again, he, well, surprised me.

"You'd be willing to move in here?"

He nodded. "Yup. You have a little private living space of your own. Bedroom, workroom, and sitting room with a complete bath. Seems to me that would be big enough to share of an evening. Though I would like to add a few things. Namely, a desk of my own in that workroom of yours."

Workroom. That was a nice name for a spell lab. Still, as odd as it sounded, I could totally see Orville sitting at a desk working on a case, and me at my counter cooking up a potion. It sounded nice. Really nice.

"What about your place?"

"Again, lots of options. Houses in town rent pretty easily. Could sell it, but I've put a lot of work into that place over the years. Hate to see it go permanently. At least to strangers."

Most likely, he'd assumed that Opie would eventually live there. That ship had sailed when the kids had all gone in together to buy that estate. Fairly certain they would not be willing to give up their

new place. I love my farmhouse, but their new place is pretty dadgum awesome.

He nodded toward the little family out in the gazebo. “You know that if things go on like they’ve started, eventually Kim’s gonna want to start living with Gray. Might work here for a bit, but eventually, they will want a place of their own.”

I nodded. I didn’t like thinking about it much, but I knew it was true all the same. “And?”

Orville scratched his chin. “And we could either give them the farmhouse, which in my opinion is an incredible place to raise children, or we could keep the farmhouse and give them my house in town. Your call on that one. Either way, it would beat all four of them trying to live in Gray’s tiny trailer.”

That got my attention. “You’ve checked him out, then, haven’t you?”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “And you haven’t?”

Shoot, we both knew the answer to that one. Of course, I had. The man was dating the mother of my godchildren. What choice did I have?

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“Yup. I’m ready, Opal. Been ready for some time now.”

“You’re really ready to marry a witch? I won’t be changing that if I agree to this, you know.”

“I want to marry you, Opal. You. You happen to be a witch. I’m not out to change anything about you. As frustrating as you can be at times, I still love you. All of you.”

“I love you, too, Orville.”

His eyes widened. Yeah, I’d never quite gotten around to saying that before.

But I still wasn’t ready to give him an answer. Love had never been my issue. Neither had spending the rest of my life with Orville as my man.

I had more thinking to do.

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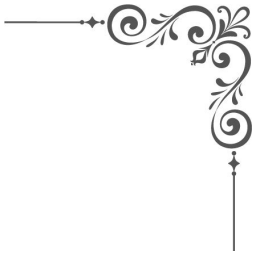

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Chapter 11

Gray and Orville stayed most of the afternoon. The kids put on their little magic show, or at least what they had put together of it so far. I remember hearing the others laughing, so I was hoping they might stand a chance at winning their little talent show.

Personally, I couldn't tell you if their act was good or not. I was far too distracted with my thoughts.

Once they'd left, we all snacked on leftovers from the picnic.

"You okay, Opal?" Kimberly asked.

I must have been even quieter than my usual self. "I will be."

"Sheriff still putting on the pressure?"

I nodded. "I could sure use some of the Goddess' guidance right about now." Then it hit me. The hilltop. Don't get me wrong, I feel close to the Goddess wherever I am, but never closer than on top of that hill behind my house.

I bundled up and took the walk. Nancy asked if I wanted company, but I could tell her heart wasn't in it. Besides, this was something I needed to be alone for. My decision to make.

Well, I guess I can admit that I had hoped not to be totally alone up on that hill. But I was. The Goddess was decidedly absent. Oh, not in her ethereal everything at once way. She was there in that. I could feel her calming presence, but there was a limit as to just how much that worked with my current situation. I'd hoped for a more upfront and personal visit.

But Her feet stayed firmly planted in the heavens. I was on my own on this one. Which I guess I should have been able to figure out without making the cold, hard trek up the blasted hill. All I got for my trouble was a quick trip over an errant tree root and a loss of energy.

It didn't help matters when Nancy came running to meet me on my way back. I could tell from her face that something was wrong. Very wrong.

It took the girl a few precious seconds to catch her breath. "What is it, child? What's happened?"

I took her by the hand and started leading her back down the path. Whatever it was, I needed to be back at the farmhouse, either way. We weren't making quite the speed Nancy had been going, but we were darn close. She'd just have to catch her breath on the way.

“It’s Sapphire. She called and said for you to come quick. And to bring Patricia if you can.” Her words were halting, but she finally got it all out.

My sister was in trouble. Crapsnackles. This wasn’t good news at all.

I checked in with Kimberly for all of thirty seconds, on my way to grab my purse and my keys, and then I was on the road. Usually, the drive between the farmhouse and my sister’s new mansion was a nice one. It might take a bit of time to get there, but the scenery was nice and calming.

That wasn’t the case tonight. Tonight, I kind of wished I had a little of Archie’s way of speeding up a trip. In that quick check in with Kimberly, I’d asked her to call Patricia for me. No way could I drive this fast and make a phone call too. My sister needed me in one piece, not scattered over the roadside or off the road in a ditch.

I barely got there in time. Patricia beat me, but then she lives a lot closer than I do.

My car wheeled into Sapphire’s round-about driveway, just as the council was taking Archie from the house. His eyes locked on mine as I struggled to climb out of the car. Funny how little things were always harder to do when time was on the line.

A quick glance showed me the trinity they’d sent for this one. Crystal, the council’s leader, Tabitha, who up until very recently had been the number two council witch, and Shaman Gaston Crowe. A very powerful trinity of witches, indeed. But then, they’d known that they were coming up against a pretty powerful duo. Sapphire and Archie were no slouches when it came to magic.

Far from it.

“This isn’t your affair, Opal Ravenswind,” Crystal called out, holding out her palm toward me. “You are in enough trouble with the council right now as it is. Keep your distance, and your magic in place.”

Me? In trouble with the council? Since when?

Then I saw Patricia standing beside Sapphire. She didn’t look happy. Ah, I got it. We were both in hot water with the council for not alerting them to the situation. And it looked like we had good reason not to do that. This seemed like a bit of overkill for the crimes thus far.

But Patricia and Sapphire’s faces told me that I just might not know the whole story.

Stretching to my full height, I stalked over to the trinity now surrounding Archie. I didn’t stop until I was face to face with Crystal herself.

“Back off, Opal,” she said. “And don’t think we won’t be dealing

with you and Patricia about this later. You've gone too far this time, protecting him. What do you think? That any member of your family is immune to the rule of the council? I've had it with your high and mighty ways."

Crystal and I had butted heads before. More than once. But this? This was too much. Then, Patricia was beside me, her hand on my arm. "Let them take him, Opal." She put her lips to my ear and lowered her voice. I wouldn't at all doubt there wasn't a little privacy magic thrown in there too. "There's been a murder."

My eyes flashed to hers. It was the break that the trinity had needed to get Archie past me and to the waiting van. As they opened up the back doors for him to step inside, he glanced back at me. "Take care of her, Opal."

And then the doors shut behind him.

I was speechless. That doesn't normally happen to me. But it did now. I just didn't have the information to go on. But I knew one thing in my heart of hearts. Archimedes Mineheart was no killer. And I'd dang well prove that. The council had better treat him well in the meantime, or they'd answer to me as well.

I hadn't made a run on Crystal's position in the council to date because, well, I had enough on my plate without that added responsibility. But if she started making mistakes like this one, that might just happen. Or, better yet, perhaps I could get Patricia to make the run instead. With the Ravenswinds at her back, she just might have it in her.

All this flashed through my mind in an instant. Most likely my mind's way of handling Patricia's news. Eventually though, my brain got back on course.

If it had just been Crystal and Tabitha, I'm not sure I would have heeded Patricia's warning. I still didn't like them taking him away. But the shaman was a friend. Actually, another member of Team Destiny, as my niece called us. I trusted him. They had done well in choosing him to complete their trinity. Or, just perhaps, that had been his idea. He was a good man and an even better witch.

We watched the van pull out onto the road. When it disappeared from sight, I walked onto the porch to stand beside my sister. "Don't worry, Sapphire. We'll get him back. I swear it."

She swallowed and nodded, her expression determined. "Dang straight we will."

"Okay, now, if one of you would be so kind, could you please tell me about this murder?"

Sapphire turned to me. "He didn't do it, you know. No way. My man is not a killer. And besides, he hasn't left my side all blooming day. We've been together."

“That doesn’t really help, Sapphire,” Patricia said softly. Then she looked at me. “They found Mark Goldman’s body this afternoon. He’s been dead a while.”

Well, crapsnackles. If that was true, then Sapphire’s alibi didn’t mean one little hill of beans. To anyone.

“How long is a while?”

“The authorities don’t know that yet.” She hesitated. “I’m in the loop, though, and I’ll let you know as soon as I hear. Knowing that could help us piece this together.”

My sister was hugging herself, shivering. Part of that, I knew, had to be from the shock of all of this, but part was the fact that she was standing there in a thin house dress in a late winter in Michigan.

“Let’s get inside where it’s warmer.” I took her elbow and led her to a sofa, Patricia following behind.

“I’ll get some coffee going. It might be a long night,” Patricia said, heading into the kitchen.

A long night. I’d probably better call Kimberly and let her know what was going on. And maybe the sheriff too. Which brought up a good question.

After covering Sapphire with an afghan to try to stop her shaking, I walked over to the kitchen doorway. “Exactly where did they find Goldman’s body?”

She looked over her shoulder at me, and my worry ratcheted up a notch. I was afraid that I would not like whatever it was she was about to tell me.

“Just outside Wind’s Crossing.” She paused for effect. “Sheriff Menard’s district.”

See? I knew I wasn’t going to like that. We’d had dealings with Menard in the past. The man didn’t earn the title of sheriff. Not in any way, shape, or form. He wasn’t high on my list of efficient police officers. If he could pin this all on Archie, he’d be a happy man. Wouldn’t really matter to him whether it was true or not. The man was more about closing cases than getting justice.

Like I said, the man didn’t earn that rank of his.

Patricia motioned with her head for me to come closer. I did.

“The council seems to think Archie might have been involved in those robberies.”

I stared at her. “You’ve got to be kidding me, right? Why on earth would Archie want to rob a bank? They have seen this place, right? And the firm?”

She nodded. “They’ve seen them, and they know it takes a lot of money to keep them both going too. They’ll be looking at everything about Archie and Sapphire with a fine-tooth comb for the next few weeks. I’m really hoping the two of them are as clean as I think they

are."

"They are. But back to the council, why would they even think that? What put that idea in their heads?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure, and they're not telling. But I'm wondering if whoever was leaving me the notes branched out." She made a face. "The note writer probably sold the two of us out too, just so you know. Let the council know they'd brought this matter to our attention and that we'd done nothing to resolve the issue. I'm not sure the council could have known that otherwise."

"But we didn't do nothing. We've been investigating this together. If the path had led to Archie, we'd have done the right thing. But he's being framed. It's pretty obvious to anyone who takes the time to actually look at the case before acting on it."

But then, looking before leaping had never really been Crystal's style. She was an act now, think later kind of witch. The more I thought about it, the more I was dead certain that we needed her off that high perch of hers. She'd been there too long, and this wasn't her first mistake either.

Patricia didn't say anything. I walked around to face her. "What are you not telling me?"

She lifted a shoulder. "I have to admit, Opal, all of this is leaving a really bad taste in my mouth. I mean, first Archie takes the case of a pretty dead certain criminal. Something he's never, ever done before. Then these odd little things happen to people with Archie's spell mark." She paused a lot longer than I liked. "I don't blame the council for trying to make sense of it. If Archie was involved in the robberies, it would be a little clearer."

I thought about it for a minute, then shook my head. "Maybe if it was just the murder, I'd agree with you." Then I realized I was still missing a very important piece of information. I was guessing, but knowledge was power. "I take it Archie's mark was found on Goldman?"

"It was." The words didn't come from Patricia. They came from Sapphire, who was now standing right behind me. "I'm not as fragile as the two of you seem to think I am, you know. You might have been working as a team of two up until now, but guess what? Your team just grew by one. Me. I'd appreciate being in on any future conversations about this." She hesitated. "Any past ones too, now that I think about it."

I looked at Patricia, and she nodded her agreement. "No problem. Three heads are better than two." Not to mention the fact that meant a trinity of witches was now on Archie's side of things.

Kind of evened the odds a bit.

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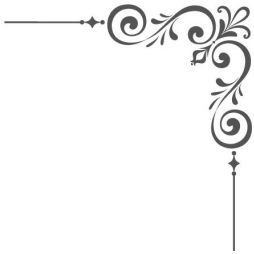

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Chapter 12

The coffee finished brewing, and Patricia poured us all big mugs of the hot delight. Which we then took into the living room.

Sapphire was past the shaking stage. I knew my sister all too well. Next would come the anger stage.

I was right.

"They had no right to do this! They wouldn't even listen to us about the missing spell book."

I took a deep breath followed by a sip of coffee before I said anything. Dealing with my sister in anger mode was more than a little tricky.

"Exactly where was Archie's mark this time?" I mean, that meant a lot right there.

Patricia's worried eyes met mine. "On the man's forehead, front and center."

My eyebrows drew together of their own accord. "That just can't be right."

She shrugged. "That's what my source said. And just for the record, my source is a good one. Trustworthy."

If they were a source to Patricia Bluespring, I didn't doubt that for an instant.

"Then, in my mind, that right there proves Archie is innocent. No witch in their right mind would murder someone and then autograph their work."

"Exactly!" Sapphire shouted.

She was really ramping up. Of course, if the situation was reversed, and it was Orville the council had taken? Oh, who was I kidding? If it had been Orville, which it would never be because he wasn't a witch, they wouldn't have taken him without a fight.

I was kind of glad that my sister's routine included a brief spurt of shock before the anger. Otherwise, things could be far messier than they already were. It almost had been with me. Sapphire is a lot more emotional than I am most times. At least with most emotions. With anger? I win, hands down. Not something I'm proud of, but true all the same.

"I'm going to try to see the body," Patricia said. "We need to see what we're dealing with."

“Before you do...” I looked over at Sapphire, “Did Archie ever, and I mean ever, cast a spell on Mark Goldman?”

Sapphire sat back against the sofa, her face triumphant. “Never. That mark is a fake.”

A fake that they had led the authorities to after a week’s worth of false trails with actual spell marks. Whoever was behind this frame-up was doing a bang-up job of it.

“How do we prove it’s a fake, then?” My eyes were on Patricia. She was the enforcer here.

“Oh, it should be easy enough to tell.” She hesitated. “Once I can get to see the body. I know it might sound like me wishing more work on your boyfriend, Opal, but I do wish that they had found the body a few miles to the west of where it was.”

“You aren’t the only one.” I chewed the inside of my cheek. A nasty habit, but one I resorted to when I was frustrated and nervous. Like now, for instance. “Maybe if we’re lucky, Orville can still get us in.”

Then again, we might have just as good of a shot going in without his help. Orville and Menard weren’t exactly fast friends. They weren’t quite enemies either, though, so it was possible that the brothers in law enforcement thing would win out. It was worth a shot, anyway.

I glanced at the clock on the wall, then looked at the others. “I need to call home and let them know what’s going on. I might close the shop for the week, unless Kimberly thinks she can handle it.” Then I remembered Sapphire’s newest venture.

“What about your muffin shop? Are you okay to close it down for a few days?”

She nodded distractedly. “Yes. You know I can’t do happiness and good luck spells when I’m worried sick. I don’t want to infect my mood on the good people of Oak Hill.”

“Then we’ll make a drive over there later tonight and put a sign up for you.”

She nodded, and I left to make my calls. Kimberly first, but Orville would be a very close second.

I didn’t keep Kimberly on the phone for long. She said she was up to the challenge of both the kids and the shop. Funny how younger people are more apt to make assurances like that. Me? I’d be thinking twice about that heavy of a load. But then the years I’ve packed into my life make a difference in energy level too.

We met in the middle. She’d handle the kids on her own. I knew that my Nancy would be a big help there, and that helped my guilt level a tiny bit. But the shop would go down to a part-time basis for the next week or two. However long it took to straighten this whole mess out. I was hoping it wouldn’t take nearly that long, but at this

point, it was anyone's guess time-wise.

The shop would open at ten, after she dropped the kids off at school, and would close at two. Anyone desperate for a bargain would have a nice four-hour window to do their shopping. I wasn't all that worried about the money angle. Thanks to the old Pearl, my mom, I had a nice little nest egg in the bank. It was more about making Kimberly feel productive.

The second call took longer, as I had to fill the sheriff in on things. I'd held off on the details with Kimberly. I preferred to tell her face to face. Orville was a different matter altogether.

I got his promise to see what he could do with the coroner on the case, and I went back to join the others.

Pulling my notebook from my bag, I sat down and looked at them. "I know it's getting late, but I will guess that the two of you are like me and not really up to sleeping right now."

Patricia snorted. "You guess right. What do you have in mind?"

I waved my notebook. "I think we need to narrow the suspect list down what we can tonight and then start making some calls on people in the morning."

Sapphire nodded. "I like that idea."

"I'm in," Patricia said.

"Good." I flipped open the notebook to the page with the list of possible suspects. Eleven names still on the page. None had been added or deleted. Yet, anyway. "Have you or Archie came up with anybody to add to the list?"

She shook her head. "No, and we've tried too. But the firm really is secure. Most of the time, anyway."

I hesitated, but then said it anyway. "What about Jack?"

Sapphire looked at me, eyebrows raised. "What about him?"

Taking a deep breath, I dove in. "Something Orville said got me to thinking the one behind this might just be a witch. I mean, they knew about the council, and most regular folks don't."

"There are a heck of a lot of witches out there, Opal. Why Jack?"

I threw a glance at Patricia, but in for a penny and in for a pound. Jack's secret just might have to have the repercussions it should have had all along. "Jack is altogether too good at those stealth spells of his. He could have been in and out with that spell journal with no one to the wiser. Couldn't he?"

"Yes. But why would Jack take the spell journal?" She seemed confused. "Jack and Merlin have been friends for a very long time. He's practically family. I mean, Arc even calls him uncle for gosh' sake."

"Yes, but he had the means and opportunity, didn't he?" I wanted to make my case on that first and foremost.

She gave a reluctant nod. “If you want to be technical about it, then yes, he did.”

“What if there is something up with Jack that we don’t know about?” I looked her in the eyes. “What if he wanted to sully Archie’s reputation so that any testimony he gave against him would be in question? I mean, I’ve seen how Archie looks at Jack. He’s not a big fan of the man, unless I miss my guess. Maybe this is Jack’s way of making a preemptive strike?”

There was only a second’s hesitation, but there was one. “No. Jack doesn’t go on the list. Not yet.”

“Pardon me, but who the devil is Jack? And what about this stealth spell of his?”

How to dodge that bullet? Spill the beans and throw Jack to the wolves? Or lie to a friend? There was only one right answer there.

“Jack is a friend of Merlin who likes to use stealth spells to relieve people of their worldly goods.”

Patricia was quiet for the space of a few heartbeats. “I see. You know I will be needing his last name, don’t you?”

Yeah, I had figured that would be her take on things. She was an enforcer, after all. Most of all, she believed in what she did. There was a good reason behind going after rogue magic users. The Salem Witch Trials came to mind.

“Maybe later I’ll give it to you. But right now, I say we stay focused on the matter at hand. To my knowledge, Jack has never used his magic to actually cause anyone physical harm.” I gave Sapphire a hard look. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

She nodded, then looked at Patricia. “I do wish Opal hadn’t brought him to your attention. The man has changed. Archie and Merlin had a nice long talk with him about his... magic use. He’s stopped using magic for bad things.”

“But he’s still a thief, isn’t he?” I asked.

Sapphire sighed. “It’s in his blood, dear. That man was born a thief. And the Goddess made him, so I really don’t think there’s any changing him now.”

Patricia opened her mouth, probably to double down on wanting Jack’s last name, when both of our cell phones went off in tandem.

I almost didn’t answer mine as I didn’t recognize the number. But then again, with everything going on at the moment, it might turn out to be important.

I’m glad I answered the call. It was Shaman Gaston Crowe.

“Are you still with Sapphire?” he asked.

“I am.”

“Good. Family needs to stick together in this.”

“Agreed. I have to ask, Gaston, do you think Archie killed that

man?"

There was a short grunt over the phone. "I do not. But right now, the evidence seems to suggest that. With that being the case, the council had no choice but to act. You understand that, correct?"

"I do." I waited a second, trying to get my wording right. I didn't want to seem to be threatening my friend, even if in a way, that was exactly what I was about to do. "And you understand that he had better be treated well while in the council's custody, do you not?"

Another grunt. "There is a reason I was part of that trinity, Opal Ravenswind. I am seeing to Archimedes' stay with us personally. You have my word on that."

"Thank you. That will go a long way in easing our minds. I appreciate you letting us know."

"That was my intention. That, and to request that you keep me up to date on your investigations into the matter. I would be by your side helping, but a man cannot be in two places at the same time. Not as of yet, at least."

"We need you more where you are, Gaston. I'll call you if and when we find anything."

"There is yet another reason for my call. A warning." There was a moment's silence as he let that sink in well and proper. "The council's leaders have not yet come up with a way to sanction you, but those discussions have not been closed. Watch yourself, Opal Ravenswind."

The call ended, and I went in to join Sapphire and Patricia. The latter did not look happy. At all.

Before I could ask what had happened, she blurted out, "You don't have to worry about giving me Jack's name anymore. I'm no longer an enforcer for the witches' council. They've terminated my contract."

I sat down slowly. "What exactly does that mean? What contract?"

"I had a contract with the council to investigate and enforce the laws of magic users. As it was pretty much a full-time job, they paid me for the work. I've just been informed that my services are no longer required. Effective immediately."

"I'm so sorry, Patricia. This shouldn't have happened. You were doing your job and a dang good job of it too. Archie didn't kill that man."

Patricia sat up a little straighter. "And I'll keep doing the job, too. Pay or no pay. It's too important to not let those snooty higher-ups have their heavy hands on everything. They don't understand the meaning of the word gray. I do."

Truthfully? That kind of surprised me. I'd always thought Patricia was a black and white kind of gal. But then, that hadn't been the case with Archie, now had it? That meant the woman was able to use her heart and brains too. The council needed those qualities in that kind

of position. We sure as heck didn't need a shoot first and ask questions later mentality like what Crystal was showing.

"What will you do for an income?"

She barked out a laugh. "Not an issue at the moment. Liz's estate has come to me now, thanks to Amie and Ruby bringing her murderer to light. Mind you, I'd much rather have Liz still alive and drawing breath, but the money is sitting in a nice little bank account waiting for me. The money part of this isn't a big deal."

I understood and agreed with her one hundred percent. This wasn't about money.

This was about reputation.

Losing money was one thing. You could generally gain it back with a little thought and hard work. But lose your reputation?

Things got a whole lot trickier to put right again.

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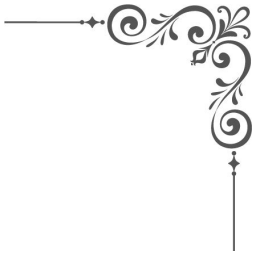

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Chapter 13

Patricia left around midnight with the promise to post the muffin shop's closed notice before heading home. Not that Sapphire didn't try her best to get the woman to stay. She did. Misery loves company and all that, but that wasn't her intention at all. There was also safety and strength in numbers. And I don't know about the others, but I had a really bad feeling in my gut that the council wasn't done with this one just yet.

Once Patricia headed out, I tried my level best to get Sapphire to agree to pack up and come stay at the farmhouse.

"Absolutely not!" Sapphire stared at me like I'd lost my mind. "I'm standing behind Archie in all this!"

I frowned at her. What? "And I'm standing right there beside you behind Archie too." Somehow that sounded better in my head than out loud. "But is there any reason we can't do our standing at the farmhouse?"

See, here's the thing. There's always a thing, isn't there? I had no doubt that Kimberly would be up to the challenge of handling three regular kids, a house, and still have it in her to run a shop. The woman was a miracle maker, not a doubt in my mind. But of the kids we were talking about, only one of them was normal.

Poor little Mason was as normal as the day was long. Nancy was a young, but surprisingly powerful, witch in her own right, but her head was in the right place, thank the Goddess. I really didn't think she'd be giving Kimberly any kind of problems. In fact, I thought she'd likely be a big help with the said normal child, Mason.

The problem was that tiny little baby Pearl. Lately, there had been signs that baby Pearl was already coming into some power. At four months old, that was unheard of. At least, I'd certainly never heard tell of that young of a proper magical witch. Baby Pearl was bound to break records and traditions all over the place, I was certain.

That's what had me decidedly worried. I needed to be there when that started happening. I also needed to figure out a way to alert Kimberly to the upcoming fiasco that was sure to come. If only my life would even halfway resemble normal for a week or two, I might get that done. That hadn't been my luck lately.

But still. How much trouble could a four-month-old witch get into

in the space of a few days? Goddess, but I really didn't want that question answered.

I looked at Sapphire again. She was standing firm on the whole making a stand thing. "I'm not going to talk you out of this, am I?"

"Not in a million years, sister." She hesitated. "But I would understand if you need to head home."

The fact that she hugged herself as she said it made me know just how much those words had cost her. She didn't want me to go any more than I wanted to leave her.

"Not happening. I'd rather we went to the farmhouse, yes. But I don't plan on leaving your side until we have this whole mess straightened out once and for all."

"And Archie is back home, safe and sound, right?"

"Goddess willing." I gave her a big bear hug. "We will get through this together, you know. You and me. It's been a while since we've been a team, but we always were a force of nature when we were. We'll get Archie back and put the council's tail between its legs too."

She smiled at me. "That sounds nice, sis." A slight pause. "And you're sure the shaman will take good care of Archie?"

I nodded. "I am. He wouldn't have called to tell us if he wasn't planning on doing just that."

"I guess that's right." Still, she didn't move toward the stairs. "Just for tonight, do you think maybe we could sleep in the kids' guest room? I don't think I could sleep on that big bed all alone."

"Sure thing, Sapphire. You go on up and start getting ready for bed. I'll straighten up down here and then come up."

I watched her walk up the stairs, and it looked like the woman was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. I didn't like that one bit. Part of me had wanted to stay down here with that list and do some brainstorming. But I was needed more upstairs.

Gathering up our used mugs, I took them into the kitchen, washed them, and put them in the drainer to dry. Then I checked the doors and windows to be sure they were locked, though why I bothered was a mystery. I was staying in a Mineheart's home. This thing had to be warded seven ways to Sunday and back again. No way would anyone get in without us knowing it.

Not even the great and powerful thief, Jack. At least, not if he had trouble making on the mind. Just in case, I double checked the locks and windows one more time.

It never paid to take chances.

The man might not be on Sapphire's list of suspects. But he sure as heck was on mine.

I DIDN'T SLEEP WELL that night at all. My sleeping self never quite made it to my sanctuary. No, the way was blocked by Crystal, Tabitha, Jack, and a host of faceless beings that all had some hidden motive to ruin the reputation of one Archimedes Mineheart, Sr. By five o'clock, I was ready to call it quits on even trying.

Sneaking out of the room so I wouldn't wake Sapphire in the next bed, I made my way down the stairs. My notebook was right where I left it. Open and in plain sight on the coffee table.

The three of us hadn't made it very far working on the suspect list last night. I think we were all in too much shock from the council's actions to be able to focus on the task at hand.

Last night was a night of giving comfort and dealing with emotions. Today would be a day of action. I was ready to get to the bottom of this.

But first things first. Coffee. There wasn't much sense in trying to get a start on the day without it. Not with as little sleep as I'd had last night. Or the last few nights, to be truthful. Orville's proposal had been the reason then. Now my brain had two things to worry about.

I'm surprised it was even still functioning. Eventually, I would crash. I just had to keep going until it was safe to do that. Goddess, give me strength.

The coffeemaker worked its magic, and the magical elixir started filling my cup. I'd opted for a single cup rather than a full pot. Sapphire had a ton of the little single-serving cups in a multitude of flavors, and one cup was faster than a whole pot.

"I hope that cup's for me."

I turned to find Sapphire standing in the doorway behind me. Taking one more deep whiff of the coffee, I handed her the cup. She needed it even worse than I did. Then I put on another.

"You couldn't sleep, either, huh?"

She blew across the top of the coffee to cool it, and shook her head. "Not well, no. I think I finally dozed off for a short bit."

"Go on and get comfortable. I'll put on a full pot of coffee so we'll have more fuel to face the day."

She hesitated. "What about breakfast? Should I fix us some eggs or something?"

I thought about it. Fixing breakfast might be a comfort thing for her. My sister was the one member of the Ravenswind family that actually enjoyed the process of cooking. To the rest of us, it was a necessity of life. To her, it was almost an art form. You could tell by the quality of the meals we put together too. Everyone looked forward to a dinner invitation from Sapphire.

In the end, though, I shook my head. "I'm not sure either of us is up to putting a heavy meal on our stomachs." I paused. "Unless you're

hungry, of course."

Sapphire made a face. "I was only asking for you. I couldn't even think about eating yet. But Archie does love his breakfasts so." Tears came to her eyes, and I crossed the room to gather her in as big of a hug as I was capable of.

"The shaman will make sure he gets his breakfast, Sapphire. You know that."

She nodded. "But will he know how Archie likes his eggs? Will he have freshly squeezed orange juice and honey butter for his toast?"

Probably not, but saying that might only upset her more. I gave her a final squeeze, then stepped back. "The shaman will see to his needs, Sapphire. That's what matters right now, isn't it? Archie has to do his part by cooperating with the council, and we have to do our part by finding out what the heck is going on. We each have our parts to play out. Try to concentrate on ours for the moment, okay?"

"I will." She wiped away the leaking tears. "But it's hard, Opal. Harder than anything I've ever faced."

She still wasn't moving toward the sofa, but at least the tears seem to have stopped. That was something.

"You don't know what it was like all those years. Having the man you loved so far away from you. Not being able to show your feelings in public. The last couple of years have been almost heaven on earth. He's the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see at night. It doesn't get any better than that."

I swallowed but didn't say anything. Her words reminded me a lot of my last conversation with Orville. Not something I wanted to think about right now. One crisis at a time was more than enough for any witch.

The pot started its brewing process, and I took my one, lonely little mug of coffee and led her into the living room. We sat on the couch directly in front of my opened notebook.

"If you had to pick one name on that list to start with, who would it be?" I asked her.

She glanced down at the list, but I don't think she actually read it. More likely the darn thing was burned into our brains by now. "Well, I know it isn't what you asked, but I think we should cross off Fran and Shyla Goldman. That takes the list down to nine, doesn't it?"

"It does. And that makes sense. I can see the Goldmans not liking Archie defending Flynn Tomlin, but I can't see either of them killing a family member for it. And it only makes sense that all of this ties together." I paused a beat. "But of the other nine?"

Sapphire took a deep breath and a sip of her coffee. "I just feel so useless, Opal. I'm not an investigator. How am I supposed to know who is behind this all? And no one on that list is a witch. How would

they know about the council? Could this be a council move against us? Could they be the ones behind this?"

"I wish I had the answers, sister, but I don't. I'm not an investigator by trade, either, you know. But we have to start somewhere, and this list is as good a place as any. If we can think of any witch names to add, we'll add them as we go. Okay?"

Another deep breath, but she nodded. "I suppose you're right." She sat there for a minute. "So how do we go about this?"

Reaching over, I pulled the notebook onto my lap. "I think we should each pick a name on the list and go from there. Maybe pay them a visit and see what their reaction is to seeing us. That might tell us a lot right there. If any of them show signs of guilt, we can double down on checking them out."

"Someone actually poured gas to start that barn fire, didn't they? That means they were right there on the scene. If we could find out where all these people were at the time the fire started..."

I smiled at her. "That's a great place to start. You just might be a crack investigator, after all, Sapphire. I've got my choice to start with, but I'm adding him to the list, so that brings us up to ten again."

She just looked at me. "It isn't Jack."

"Then checking into him won't yield any results, will it? But he's still my first choice to look into. I'm sorry, but he just checks too many boxes for me. I know he doesn't appear to have a motive, but there very well could be something there we don't know about. That's what investigations are for, you know. To reveal hidden motives and such."

Sapphire shook her head and leaned back, settling deeper into the corner of the sofa. "Well, I guess for my choice of a starting point, I'd have to go with Daniel Davis. The young attorney who expected Archie and Merlin to take him on as a full partner in the firm. Unlike Jack, he had means, opportunity, and motive."

And just like that, we had a plan for the day.

Right up until the phone rang.

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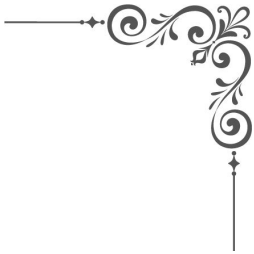

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Chapter 14

It was Orville.

"I'm sorry for calling this early, Opal. But my friend in the coroner's office just got back with me. He works the midnight shift, but the shift changes at eight. If you really think you're up to this, I can get you in. But it has to be now."

"I'm up for it, sheriff." I paused a heartbeat. "Any chance of me bringing a couple of guests?"

"I think we can get by with one. Two would be pushing the envelope too much, I think. And if it was me? I think I'd go with Patricia Bluespring over Sapphire. I'm not sure that Sapphire needs to see this."

I agreed. But getting her to agree was another matter altogether.

"I'll make the call and be there as soon as I can. Are we meeting you there, or at the office?"

"How about I pick you up at the farmhouse?"

Shoot. There was a problem with that plan. "I'm not there, Orville. I stayed with Sapphire last night. It will take me a good forty-five minutes to get there."

"Then why are we still talking? Get on the road, Opal. I'll be at the farmhouse waiting for you."

And he was gone.

I looked over at Sapphire. This might not be pretty, but I needed Patricia to take a look at that body. She was much better at magical signatures than I was. But how to get my sister to agree?

Turns out I shouldn't have worried about that.

"I have no interest in seeing the body, sis," she said, shivering. Guess Orville did a better job reading my sister than I did. "You and Patricia go ahead without me."

I needed to be on the road, but I also needed to take care of my sister. The farmhouse. Of course. "You know, Sapphire, it would be a big help to my conscience if you could help Kimberly get the kids ready for school. That's usually a two-adult job, and I feel kind of bad ditching her. Then I could pick you back up when we're done."

She swallowed and looked at me. Chances were, Sapphire knew exactly what I was doing and why. But she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she looked almost relieved.

“A little baby Pearl time might just do me good.”

As neither of us had actually gotten undressed for bed the night before, we were pretty much ready to go. No sense in taking the time to make ourselves presentable and miss our golden opportunity.

While my car warmed up enough to melt the frost, we brushed our teeth and hair. Then I made a quick call to Patricia. We would pick her up on our way. And I don’t think I woke her, either. Seems that not sleeping thing was contagious.

By the time we made it to the farmhouse, exactly forty-five minutes from the time the good sheriff ended our call, by the way, Orville was already sitting outside waiting for us.

Patricia and I switched cars, and Sapphire went inside. She’d called ahead to let Kimberly know to expect her. Asking Sapphire to help with the kids had been an improvisation on my part. But Kimberly seemed appreciative of the help. I hoped that wasn’t a bad sign that things were shaky on the home ground.

“Thanks for getting us in, Sheriff,” Patricia said from the backseat.

He glanced back at her with a smile. “Not a problem. Kind of wish he’d answered my call last night, though. I never was much of a one for last-minute rushes.”

Yet another thing my man and I had in common.

Being in a sheriff’s vehicle had some perks. Like not having to follow the speed limit. We made it to the coroner’s office and morgue by two minutes past seven. We had less than an hour of our window left, and I was betting the man would want us out way earlier than that in case the next shift came in early.

Orville turned to me as we walked in. “You sure you’re up to this?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. I didn’t see him asking Patricia if she had a problem with it. “I am.”

“Okay, then. Let’s do this.”

His friend turned out to not be a man at all. In fact, she was all woman. I also noticed something else about Orville’s friend other than her gender. She was a lot happier to see Orville than she was to see me. In fact, she seemed quite put off by my being there.

Not that she said anything to us, mind you. But if I had to guess, I’d say Orville would get an earful later. I just hoped he hadn’t used his manly charms to get us in. Or, at least, hadn’t done so on purpose. Orville could be kind of dense about his effect on women. Whereas I saw that effect quite plainly.

Sammy, his non-male coroner friend, led the three of us in to the proper morgue. The body of Mark Goldman was already out on a table waiting for us. As she reached for the sheet covering him, my stomach lurched. I was doubly thankful for not having eaten yet. Now, all I had to worry about was keeping the coffee down.

She had handed us masks before we entered the room, and as I took my first breath inside, I understood why. There was a definite smell in the air.

Goddess help me, but I'd been wrong. I wasn't ready for this at all. Patricia, however, was. She stepped up and examined the man's forehead and mark. My eyes were on everything but the body. That was the only reason the coffee was staying put.

I felt the magic when Patricia released the spell, and I saw Sammy's eyes widen. "Is that magic?" Followed by a very quick, and worried, "You aren't changing anything, are you?"

I saw Patricia shake her head out of the corner of my eye. "I wouldn't do that. I'm just enhancing my view of the mark on his forehead. You have my utmost assurances the body will remain exactly the same."

Sammy cast a worried glance at Orville, but nodded. I think she was regretting her decision to let him bring guests.

Within minutes, Patricia seemed satisfied. She stepped back from the body and gave Orville a nod. "We're done here."

Sammy stepped forward quickly to take a look at the body. She seemed a lot more relaxed by what she saw. What had she expected the magic to do? Make the mark disappear or something?

We walked out and got back into the sheriff's car. Only then did he turn to Patricia. "Well?"

Her smile kind of said it all to me. "The mark is an utter and complete fake. Not a speck of magic about the darn thing. Archie is in the clear."

Orville looked at her and then at me. "Will the council take your word for that? Or will they have to see it for themselves?" He hesitated. "I'm not all that sure we'll get a repeat viewing."

I was pretty positive we wouldn't. Sammy hadn't been happy about the magic thing. Or the women guests thing either, for that matter.

Patricia hesitated and looked away. "Yesterday, I would have said yes. The council would take my word. But as I'm no longer working for them in that capacity, I do not know. Hopefully, they will have their own methods of confirmation. Whether they do or not doesn't change the fact that the sign on the man's forehead is not a spell mark."

"And to me, that's pretty much proof positive that someone is trying to frame Archimedes," I said, with a glance at Orville. "Don't you think so?"

"I do," he said. "But it's not me you have to convince."

ORVILLE DROPPED US back off at the farmhouse before heading into

work.

It was still early enough that Kimberly and the kids were still there. She met us at the door. “Any luck?” she asked quietly.

“Yes. Good news all around. The spell mark was a fake.”

“Oh, praise the Goddess,” Sapphire said, stepping forward. “I knew it was a fake, of course. Just by where it was. Spell marks are never that obvious about showing themselves. You have to look for them.”

Patricia nodded. “That’s true almost one hundred percent of the time. I feel better now that I’ve seen it for myself. It wouldn’t surprise me if they find they applied it with a magic marker or something. That’s the closest to magic that it comes, though.”

Sapphire was beaming. “So, when do we go spring Archie? Now is a splendid time for me.”

Patricia hesitated. “Don’t get your hopes up, Sapphire. There’s still the issue of the cases with the real spell marks. I can see Crystal and Tabitha holding firm on those until we can present evidence as to what really happened.”

“But that isn’t fair. This mark should be proof enough that someone is out to get him.”

“If you were dealing with a rational witch like me, maybe. But we’re talking about the highest seated witch in our district. I don’t think rational is a word many people apply to Crystal.”

I grunted. “You know, I’m beginning to feel like maybe Crystal isn’t the right witch for that job.”

Patricia barked out a laugh. “You’re preaching to the choir on that one, Opal. I’ve been saying that for a very long time. But until a stronger witch challenges her for the seat…” her words trailed off. “I’ve been kind of hoping you’d take that on, you know.”

I shook my head. “Too much time and responsibility. Besides, the Goddess seems to have other plans for me and my family. Our whole Team Destiny, actually.”

“Yeah, I have noticed that.”

“Well, if we can’t spring him, then at least we can visit him, right? I want to give him the news in person.”

Right, that’s why she wanted to see him. She wasn’t fooling me one bit. Then again, Sapphire wouldn’t rest until she saw the conditions her man was living under. Can’t blame her much for that, either.

I looked at Patricia. “You up for a road trip?”

“Shoot yes.” She wrinkled her nose at me. “But might I make one tiny little suggestion without hurting either of your feelings?”

“I’m going,” Sapphire said. “That isn’t up for discussion,”

Patricia smiled at her. “You going is kind of the primary reason for the trip. I wouldn’t try to convince you otherwise.”

“Then what?” I asked.

She gave me a wry grin. “Maybe the two of you could shower and change first? You both look a bit… wrinkled.”

I glanced over at Sapphire even as she glanced over at me. Patricia had a point. It wouldn’t do to go before our illustrious leader (ha!) looking less than respectable. Impression was a powerful thing all on its own.

“Don’t suppose you have a dress that you’d loan me?”

“Not a problem. You can have the pick of my closet.” Such as that was. I wasn’t much of a one for fashion like my sister was. But plain black dresses never went out of style, did they? Maybe I was more fashionable than I knew.

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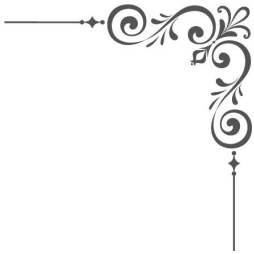

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Chapter 15

The council's safe keep isn't an actual prison. As such, it doesn't look very institutional like. In fact, it looked more like the witches' library.

Actually, as it turns out, it was the witches' library. Or at least an annex of it. Getting in was the first wrinkle.

Tabitha met us at the gate. We didn't even make it to the door.

"Turn back. This isn't the time or place," she said.

"I don't see how that could possibly be true," Sapphire said. Normally her tone was as easy-going as voices came. Not today. You could have struck a match on her tone of voice today. "Unless you are telling me that the council has seen the error of its ways and already released my husband?"

"You know that isn't the case," Tabitha said. "But if you think we will let a witches' trinity anywhere near him, you've got another think coming."

"Funny. Ha." Patricia said. "And unless you are bringing charges against us, Tabitha, you have no right to keep us off of any council grounds. Not while we are members in good standing. But you know that, don't you?"

A little of Tabitha's certainty ebbed away. I hadn't known that little tidbit myself, and I was guessing she hadn't either. Having a council enforcer on your side was a definite plus. Well, ex-enforcer, but that had only been recent.

Patricia took pity on her. "I understand your concerns, however, about the trinity." She looked Tabitha straight in the eyes. "Especially when you are dealing with such a powerful one as ours." She lowered her voice and took one small step forward. "In fact, I'd dare to say nothing aside from a full-on council attack would stop us from our goal. Lucky for you, that goal is just to see Archimedes Mineheart. You have my assurances that is our only intent at this time."

Tabitha's face lost a bit of its color, but she opened the gate. Even if I could tell that was the last thing in the world she wanted to do.

"I'll let you in, but you have to see Crystal before I agree to take you to Archimedes."

"That is perfectly acceptable to us."

Only that's not exactly what happened. No. What happened was

that Archie and Shaman Crowe came walking up behind Tabitha. She gave quite a start.

At least I'd seen them coming. Had a firm grasp on my sister's arm to keep her from running to him too. We had to follow the rules. If we followed the rules, then they would be bound by them too. If we didn't, all bets were off.

"Archie!" Sapphire cried. "Are they letting you go?" Then her eyes fell, as mine did, to the solid steel bracelets he wore. Steel and magic didn't readily coexist with each other.

But to me, those bracelets were a good sign. I was really hoping that Sapphire would see them as such too. I'd halfway feared that we'd find Archie in a magic draining cell. At least the bracelets didn't drain magic. They merely contained it inside one's body. A big step up.

And the out walking and not in a cell thing was a pleasant surprise all on its own.

"Sadly, no my lady," Gaston said. "But as you can see, he is not suffering too much distress at his detainment." Then the shaman looked at Tabitha. "You may go, dear, and alert Crystal to our visitors. I'm quite sure she's been waiting for them."

Tabitha didn't seem too happy with his dismissal, but she wasn't the second in command anymore. The shaman flat out outranked her.

Once she stalked off, he led us over to a small park-like alcove on the grounds, complete with fire pit and surrounding benches. I had already decided that Shaman Crowe was a good witch. After all, he was a member of our team, and that wasn't a decision to be made lightly. But he rose in my estimation even more by his actions here.

Most witches would have bowed down to what I was fairly certain was a standing order to bring us to Crystal immediately. He seemed more intent on having her come to us.

Which gave us a precious few minutes of privacy. I appreciated that.

I had no problem talking openly in the shaman's presence. That wasn't so much true with Crystal around.

"Opal saw the body, Archie. The spell mark is a fake!" Sapphire burst out. She'd obviously thought it would be good news.

Archie looked over at Shaman Crowe and then back to Sapphire. "We know."

"Wait. You do?" I asked. It would have been nice to have known that before I forced myself to walk into that morgue. Could have bypassed a lot of unpleasantness there.

Gaston looked at me. "Contrary to what you may believe, my good witch, my friends and I have not exactly sat idle in all of this. We are all working toward the same goal. The clearing of Archimedes' name."

“How long have you known?” Sorry, but I just couldn’t let it drop like that. I’d seen a dead body for nothing. I had to know.

“Only a few hours. A friend of mine visited the morgue where the late Mr. Goldman is resting.”

Archie grinned at us. “And he didn’t go alone, either. Jack went with him. If you get my drift.”

Sapphire threw me one of her I told you so looks. “So, Jack is helping too?”

“He is,” Archie said. “Although that was pretty much his efforts on the matter, I’m afraid. Not much for a thief to do in a situation like this.”

“Well, at least he stepped up and did what he could.” Sapphire’s eyes were still on me.

Sorry, this still didn’t convince me of Jack’s innocence in all this. It would take a lot more to do that.

I looked at the shaman. “So, when will Archie be released from custody?”

He shook his head. “The council is standing firm on a full investigation of all cases regarding Archimedes’ spell mark before settling the matter.” For a moment, the shaman looked decidedly conflicted. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear that this entire thing is making Crystal very happy. But there is no logical reason for that, is there?”

I snorted. “Other than the fact that the Ravenswinds and Minehearts are now tied together, and she hates my living guts, you mean?”

He frowned at me. “Surely, no one is that petty. To put an innocent witch through this without just cause.”

Lifting a shoulder, I just gave him a look. “And if you were on that high seat, would Archie still be detained? Knowing that his spell journal was stolen and the obviously planted trail that the thief laid out for the council to follow to Goldman?”

His lips thinned out, but he remained quiet. The shaman wasn’t much to talk bad about people. No matter how much they deserved it.

“That’s something that’s kind of bothering me,” Patricia said. “Whoever did this had to know we’d be able to spot the fake mark, right?”

Archie shook his head sadly. “According to Jack, the mark was quite convincing. It took a spell to determine whether or not it was magical.”

“Well, yes, but…” Then Patricia nodded. “I think I see. A non-witch might not know that we could tell the difference.”

“Or maybe a witch would know, but assumed we wouldn’t be allowed to see the body to verify the mark. Another possibility is that

the mark wasn't for the council at all. Rather, the marks leading to Archie were there for regular law enforcement."

"But eventually even the regulars will find out that mark is a fake. If they do their job properly, at least."

Archie took a deep breath, just as the doors opened to the annex and Crystal stalked out. He spoke hurriedly. "Maybe they knew that too. Maybe they don't really want me to go down for this. Just maybe someone is trying to delay me on the Tomlin case. Maybe someone wants him to burn."

That statement brought up a lot of questions in my mind. Unfortunately, there was no time to ask them.

Crystal had arrived.

WE GOT OUR WALKING papers after that. Not that I expected anything different from the woman. Witches had rights, dang it. And according to Patricia, who I was quite sure knew her stuff, we had the right to be there. Just as much right as Crystal did, in fact.

Of course, our wonderful leader didn't appreciate being reminded of that little rule. So she did what she could to bypass it. She separated us from Archie. Not much we could do about that. And no real reason to stay after that, either.

A fact Crystal knew all too well.

I'd be calling Gaston's personal phone later on today. Once Crystal had cooled her heels a bit. The woman couldn't be there twenty-four-seven, could she? We'd do our best to time our next visit during her off hours.

Although, with Archimedes Mineheart in custody, those might be few and far between. I wouldn't put it past the woman to sleep on her office sofa.

Anything to spite me and my family.

The sooner we wrapped this dang thing up, the better. And once we found that spell journal, that shouldn't be too hard to do.

We sat in the small parking lot for a minute, each of us lost in our thoughts. Finally, Sapphire broke. "So, are you all up for a side trip on the way home?"

She had opted for the backseat to give Patricia shotgun position. I turned to where I had both of my companions in view. "Where did you have in mind?"

"I'm thinking we pay a visit to Daniel Davis, attorney at law."

"That's the young upstart that wanted to be a partner in Archie's firm, isn't it?" Patricia asked thoughtfully.

"That's the one. And I can think of a few reasons he'd want Archie out of the way too. For one, the caseload at the firm isn't nearly light

enough for one attorney to handle. Merlin will be scrambling to get things postponed and squared away. He could use another attorney at hand. A fact that Mr. Davis might be trying to drive home."

She had a point, at that. But it bothered me all the same. Something just wasn't right here. I kept feeling like there was something big that I was missing. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

Patricia looked over at me. "It's as good of a place as any, right?"

The others worked their magic as I drove us back to Oak Hill. Well, technological magic, that is. As it turned out, Daniel Davis, attorney at law wasn't such an easy man to find. But you just can't hide from Google these days. Not that he was trying to hide, mind you. Quite the opposite. He just wasn't very good at it.

I followed the directions Patricia read off to me, and we ended up parked across the street from a hole in the wall building featuring a tire shop with a one-car bay off to the side. The neighborhood wasn't the greatest either. Oak Hill was a pretty town for the most part. This street? Not so much.

"You sure this is the right address?" I asked.

"That's what it says on his social media profile." Sapphire squinted out the window. "Looks like there's an apartment over the tire shop. Could that be it?"

I raised an eyebrow. "If so, then the boy must have been counting hard on that partnership with the Minehearts."

Sapphire reached for the door handle. "Wait a minute, sis. I think you need to sit this one out."

She just looked at me. Yeah, I didn't think that would go over well. But I had my reasons.

"Look, sis. Chances are really good that Davis did his homework on the Minehearts before approaching them. That homework probably included you. He'll recognize you."

"And your point?"

Patricia took over my argument for me. "We are far more likely to get useful information out of him if he doesn't think we have ties to Arch."

Sapphire didn't look happy about it, but she finally gave us a terse nod. "Fine. Go ahead then, without me. I'll just sit here twiddling my thumbs like I don't have a care in the world."

"You could do that," I said slowly. "Or you could keep digging up dirt on Davis online." My sister, unlike me, had the very latest of smart phones. Surfing the web on the road wasn't an issue for her.

As she reached for her phone, Patricia and I climbed out of the car. Better get a move on before Sapphire changed her mind.

I knew my sister, and the research would only hold her for so long.

She had too much to lose in this.

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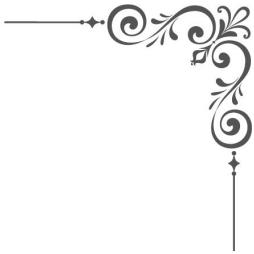

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Chapter 16

It took us almost reaching the tire shop before we saw the small door to the side with a hand-printed sign with an arrow. It read: Daniel Davis, Attorney at Law, Office Upstairs.

Very original. I hoped the man had a more professional version on order. Otherwise, I really didn't think his career as a lawyer would get off to a great start.

Before we opened the door to the stairs, Patricia turned to me. "You willing to follow my lead on this one?"

I shrugged. "Why not? You are the one with the most experience in this kind of thing."

"Good. Then whatever I say, just play along, all right?"

That got my curiosity up, but I nodded all the same.

The door at the top of the stairs and to the left held another hand-printed sign telling us that we had, indeed, reached our destination. My eyes, however, weren't focused on the sign itself. Rather, my gaze focused on the small pentagram burned into the wood beside it. The symbol was tiny, but there was a faint magical glow to it.

I elbowed Patricia and motioned to it. A little smile came over her face, and she nodded. I had a funny feeling her plan just changed a bit.

Staring at the door, I was undecided. This was an office, right? So, was the protocol to just walk right in? Or was it still polite to knock?

Patricia ended up doing both. She reached to turn the knob, but it stayed firmly in place, locked. So she gave three light taps on the frosted glass of the door.

The frosting did its job well. We couldn't make out details of the inside, but there was definite movement. Somewhat frenzied movement, too, I might add. I didn't think Daniel Davis, Attorney at Law had very many visitors.

Just before the shadow reached the door, Patricia turned to me and in a louder voice than she usually used said, "I don't know, sis. I still think we should try Mineheart Law."

The shadow stopped moving. He was listening.

"We did try, remember? They turned us away. That firm is too swamped with cases to take on our little problem."

"I know, but maybe we should give it another go? Maybe they

could bring someone in to help us?"

Even with the delay for eavesdropping, he was still straightening his clip-on tie as he opened the door with a serious expression. Well, he was going for serious, I was pretty sure. It looked like he would break out in a huge grin at any moment.

Patricia was playing straight to the man's heartstrings. Well, I say man. But he truly didn't qualify for that term yet to me. How on earth did one so young get through all the schooling to become a lawyer? Was he some kind of prodigy or something? And if so, what the devil was he doing in a place like this?

Oh yeah, his firm of choice had turned him down.

"Please come in, ladies." He held the door open for us. The inside of his office was just as impressive as the outside. Which is to say, it wasn't.

There was an old metal desk with an office chair behind it that had actual duct tape on the arms to hold the meager stuffing in place. And in front of the desk were two tall-backed wooden kitchen chairs. The kind that were usually found at the curb on trash day.

Come to think about it, that might be how he outfitted his whole office. The only other pieces of furniture in the tiny little room were a metal filing cabinet behind and to the left of the desk, and a small bookcase to the right.

Even with the sparse furnishings, there wasn't a lot of room left. Some of the items on that bookcase and desk, however, were very interesting. The man was either a witch or posing as one. I wanted to know which case was right.

I pulled a little magic and sent it his way. An elemental witch would feel it for what it was. He never batted an eye. Not an elemental, then. But he still could be a hedge witch. Sometimes they could hold genuine power too. Just look at our friend Lily. She was scary as heck.

Coming from me, that meant something.

"Please, have a seat, ladies, won't you?" The boy was fairly begging. Like we were gonna take off running on him or something. Kind of made me wonder if that had happened to him before.

I looked at the offered chairs rather doubtfully. But they appeared to be clean enough, even if they were old and scarred to the high-heavens. We sat.

Patricia looked at me. "I'm still not sure you would be able to help us." She turned her eyes to him. "We are witches, you see, and we need someone who is rather familiar with what we go through on a daily basis."

Now the grin that the boy had been fighting broke through. "Then I'm your man all right. I'm a witch too!"

She gave him a look. “You are? You don’t look very witchy.”

His grin never faltered. “Well, neither do the two of you, to be honest. But I can sense the magic in you all the same.” Liar, liar, I thought. He hadn’t budged an inch when I’d sent that magic his way. What was this kid’s game, anyway? Was he really a witch or just a wannabe? There was a big difference between the two. “I’m a hedge witch, though. I’m pretty sure the two of you are elementals. Aren’t you?”

I sat up a little straighter. This next part would be tricky. A lot of people had heard of me. I was rather famous, even all the way over here in Oak Hill. Unfortunately, a lot of people also knew I was sister to the wife of Archimedes Mineheart. I didn’t want him knowing that last part.

Lucky for me, Patricia stepped in before I opened my big mouth and risked it. “My sister and I are elementals, yes. But we have nothing against hedge witches either. Brothers-in-arms in a way, aren’t we?”

“Absolutely.” I really don’t think his head could have nodded any more forcefully than it did without flying off his neck. “On the same side. And if you need help in the witch world, I’m your man.”

He did like that saying, didn’t he? I played dumb and just went with a doubtful look to Patricia. It was better to let her do the talking.

“Are you familiar with our ruling body?”

There went the nodding again. “The witches’ council? Of course. Are you in trouble with them?” For the first time, his confidence seemed to fade just a bit.

“No, not at all. Members of good standing all around here. But the council is thinking about adding a new by-law to our rules, and it’s one I’m not a fan of. I wanted to know if there was any legal way to stop them.” She hesitated, then started to stand. “You know, this is going to be a really big deal, I’m afraid. I think maybe we should keep trying with the Mineheart firm. No offense to you, but they are very well known for this kind of thing, you know.”

No nodding now. “I know. But they are also very selective in their clients. They have to be, with only two lawyers in the entire firm. They need to take on more hands on deck.”

“I agree one hundred percent.” She gave him a careful look. “Perhaps you should make yourself available to them? What with you being a witch, too, it would seem like the perfect partnership to me. And if you had the Minehearts behind you, I’d have a lot more confidence placing this matter in your hands.”

He glanced around the office like he was expecting someone to suddenly appear, watching or listening to our conversation. Paranoid much? “Just between the three of us, I’m working on that even as we

speak. I've already had one meeting with their firm."

Well, that was true enough. Not a meeting that had gone well for him. But a meeting all the same.

Leaning forward, he lowered his voice. Maybe he did think someone was listening in. But who? "I'm meeting with Merlin Mineheart this very afternoon. And get this, he called me. I'm really close to becoming a partner in their firm."

I arched an eyebrow at Patricia. For some reason, I believed the boy. And for the life of me, I couldn't understand why Merlin had called to schedule an appointment with him.

She still kept her doubtful look. "Having a meeting with Merlin is one thing. But isn't he the junior partner over there? Isn't Archimedes Mineheart the lead lawyer of the firm? Will he be at this meeting too?"

See, most people who have a lick of sense probably would have seen through Patricia's blatant fishing trip by now. Not our boy. I was starting to think he was just happy to have someone to talk to.

Danny boy leaned even further over the desk toward us, his voice going lower still. Any lower and he'd be whispering. "Rumor on the street is that Archimedes ran afoul of the council. No one has seen him in the past twenty-four hours. Merlin's scrambling right now to cover his caseload and extend his court dates."

"What did he do?" I asked, forcing my eyes to go wide. I may have been overacting a bit, but he didn't seem to notice.

He hesitated, then leaned back in his chair, looking smug. "No one knows. But it had to have been bad, right? For the council to get involved, I mean." Danny's chest puffed out. "He might just need a talented lawyer himself."

Fat chance he'd be calling you anytime soon. Or ever.

"Well, then, I think it might be best to wait until after your meeting with Merlin to continue our little conversation," Patricia said, standing, "Come along, sister."

I thought Patricia was acting a little strange, but I'd agreed to let her lead with Davis. We made it out to the car. No sooner had we shut the doors behind us when Patricia burst out laughing.

"Oh, Opal, you will be the death of me yet. I just about lost it in there when you gave that boy those huge puppy dog eyes."

"She what?" asked Sapphire. "Opal? My Opal? This I have to hear about."

I grunted. "We were acting, right? And I don't think he minded so bad, now did he?"

Patricia wiped her eyes. Yeah, she was laughing that hard. I could have gotten on my high horse and ignored the laughter. I could have, but I didn't. I was among family and friends. It's safe there to laugh at

oneself.

Not that I actually laughed, mind you. At least not on the outside.

We filled Sapphire in on our visit.

“So, he is a witch then. With full knowledge of the council and everything.” There was just a tiny bit of gloating in Sapphire’s voice. My sister did so love being right.

I nodded. “Yes. And as much as it pains me to say this. Danny boy just might be our man after all.”

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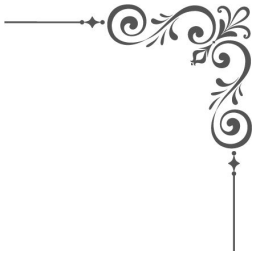

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Chapter 17

We made one brief stop off before calling it a day. Mineheart Law. I wanted a little chat with good old Merlin. Just what was the man up to?

We walked past Arc at the front desk. Looked like he was doubling as receptionist today.

"Heather call in sick again?" Sapphire asked.

He nodded. "Third time this month, too." He glanced back toward the offices. "I should tell you that Merlin won't be much in the mood for a social call. He's swamped right now, things being what they are."

I just arched an eyebrow at him. "Then it's a really good thing this call isn't a social one, isn't it?" Then, as he reached for the intercom, I put my hand over his. "Don't bother, Arc. He'll know we're here soon enough."

We walked into Merlin's office to find him sitting at his desk with his head in his hands. The very picture of a defeated man. Sapphire crossed the room and laid her hand on his shoulder. "It will be all right, dear. You'll see."

He put his hand over hers and gave her a sad smile. "I know. But the time in between it being wrong and right just might kill me." He shook his head. "That young upstart of a Davis just might have been right, after all. We could really use a third lawyer here. The caseload alone is almost more than two can handle. Now, with it just being me... I'm drowning in paperwork and court appearances. Not to mention worry about Archie. I need him here."

"Yes, dear, you do. And I need him at home too. We're working on that." She hesitated just for a second. "But you aren't truly thinking of bringing young Davis into the firm, are you?"

He seemed taken aback by her question. "Goddess, no. That boy may be good at passing tests, but he doesn't have an ounce of common sense in his entire body! Walking in here and almost demanding to be made a partner right off the bat? The boy is delusional at best, crazy at worst. I'm not sure which, but either way, he's no match for the firm."

"Then you didn't schedule an appointment with him this afternoon?"

Merlin's eyes sharpened on me. "How did you know about that?"

“We just came from his office. He seemed pretty confident that with things what they currently are, he had a good chance of changing your mind about him. Especially as you called him this time. I’d like to know why.”

He grunted. “Somehow I’m guessing you know why. Most likely for the same reason you went to see him yourself. I want to know if he’s messed up in all of this. He was in Archie’s office. He could have been the one to take that blasted spell journal.”

“You’re looking into Archie’s case too, dear?” Sapphire asked. “How nice.” Then she looked around her at the mounds of paperwork and heaps of files. “But perhaps your time would be best spent just keeping things running here. Let us handle the thing with Archie.”

Merlin shook his head. “Archie might be your husband, Sapphire, but he was my brother first. If Opal was in trouble, would you stand by and let others handle it?”

“I would not.”

“And neither will I.”

“So, bottom line, there are a lot of people working to clear Archie’s name,” Patricia said, speaking for the first time. “It might help if we communicated a little better though. Save us time in the long run. I’m going to guess you knew Jack went to examine the mark on Goldman’s body?”

Merlin hesitated, then nodded.

That got a grunt from me. “I most certainly would have appreciated knowing that a lot earlier. Would have saved me a sight I won’t soon forget.” A smell, too, for that matter.

He looked at us. “You saw the mark too? How?” Then his face cleared. “Sheriff Taylor. I should have known.” Merlin glanced at his desk clock rather pointedly. “I’ll agree to update you ladies if you agree to do the same with me. I had no idea you were working on this, either, you know. But for now, you three need to leave. I don’t want Daniel to see you, and he strikes me as one who will show up early.”

Part of me wanted to stay. Hide out in a neighboring office and listen in to the whole conversation. But the risk was too high. If the boy did see us, the jig would be up. It was far better to work the double angles with him.

We left.

I WAS STILL ITCHING to go and see Jack. The problem was, I didn’t want tag alongs when I did. I wanted to face him one on one. I thought it would be much more likely I’d get the answers I wanted that way. But that would not happen this afternoon.

Besides, Sapphire was strung tighter than a violin string. I didn't want her to go breaking on me. She needed a little downtime.

"I vote we go back to the farmhouse and regroup. Maybe pick up a pizza on the way for lunch. What do you girls say?"

"Why the farmhouse? My place is quicker," Sapphire said.

Yeah, but her place didn't have my secret relaxation weapon. Baby Pearl. But I had another excuse to throw out there too. "I promised to make magician capes for the kids. And while I know within reason you have a sewing machine, Sapphire, the material I want to use is back home."

Patricia looked at me. "You sew?"

"You don't?"

Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. At least, not at first. The second try, she did better. "No. I don't, actually."

"Might be something you want to take up then. Comes in handy sometimes."

"I'll keep that in mind."

By the time we picked up the pizzas and made it home, I was half-starved. First things first, we ate. I noticed that when Archie's well-being was at stake, my sister's new rule of no business talk at meal times flew out the window.

"So, what's our next step?" she asked.

I looked at Patricia, who shrugged. "We pick another name on the list and hit them up tomorrow. Then we just keep working our way down the list until we can prove Archie is innocent of all wrong-doing."

"You mean until we find out who took the gosh darn spell journal," I said.

"One and the same thing, isn't it?" Patricia took another bite, looking thoughtful. "At this point, though, the main thing is just convincing the council. Once Crystal digs her heels in, that could take some doing. Just proving the journal was stolen might not be enough. We will need rock-solid evidence that whoever stole the book used that knowledge to frame Archie. That might not be so easy to do."

"True. But finding the thief is the first hurdle."

"Granted."

I must have put too much emphasis on the word 'thief' for Sapphire's liking. "For the last time, Opal, it isn't Jack. I don't know what you have against that man, but you heard Shaman Crowe and Merlin, right? Jack is helping Archie. He didn't take that journal."

Yeah, I still wasn't convinced of that. Sorry. But arguments with Sapphire rarely ended well. I'd learned that at a very young age. It was better to just go quiet and let her think she'd won. Changing the subject was always a good idea too.

Come to find out, company worked well as a distraction too. I found that little tidbit out when we all heard Orville's car coming up the drive.

I met him at the door. As he wasn't in too big of a hurry walking up to the porch, I took it that the news wasn't all that dire.

"You smell that Carney's pizza all the way from town, did you?"

He grinned at me. Another good sign that all was well. Or, well, as well as could be expected. "I'm good, but not that good." He looked past me to the boxes on the coffee table. We'd foregone the whole kitchen thing for once. "But if you happen to have a slice or two to spare, I wouldn't say no."

"I'll grab you a plate." The trip to the kitchen didn't take long, even with the stop to pull a cold bottle of pop out of the fridge. "Help yourself. There's more in the fridge too. I stocked up for the kids."

"Bless you. I didn't have time for lunch today."

"Busy time for the law in Wind's Crossing?"

He shook his head. "No, and don't jinx me either. I'm counting on it staying that way for a few days." He bit into the pizza and let out a little groan. Yeah, Carney's could do that to you.

His words struck up my curiosity, but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of begging for it. He'd tell me in due time, anyway. Not that he wouldn't make me suffer a little for the not begging thing.

He turned to the other women and nodded. "Ladies." Then his eyes focused on Patricia. "That was pretty impressive this morning, I have to say. You really are the real deal, aren't you?"

She nodded. "About as real as they come, sheriff."

"You ever think about getting back on that saddle?"

Patricia shrugged. "It didn't work out so well last time. Why try it again?"

He looked at me but didn't say anything. Something else to ratchet up my curiosity. I had a funny feeling that there was something else he wanted to say to her. I also had a funny feeling that my being in the room was keeping him from saying it.

What was up with that? I didn't like the thought of my man keeping things from me. Especially things he'd be willing to share with Patricia.

Whether he saw my concerned gaze for what it was or not, he doubled back to the earlier conversation. "I was too busy for lunch because I was wrapping up some loose ends on my desk. I'm taking the rest of the week off. You gals have another partner to help in this investigation. In fact, I'd be perfectly happy to take the whole darn thing off your hands."

Well, off me and Sapphire's hands. I was pretty sure he might want Patricia's help. Which kind of rankled me.

“We’d be happy for the help, Sheriff, but we’re in this too deep to stop now.” Sapphire spoke for me on that one. It was probably better that way. I might have said something I shouldn’t have.

I tended to do that when I got rankled.

Orville nodded slowly. “I kind of figured you’d all feel that way.” He looked at each of us in turn. “But you know, we could double our efforts if we split into two teams.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. I really hoped he wasn’t about to go where I was afraid he was about to go.

He wasn’t. Thank the Goddess.

“Opal and I could concentrate on the in-person interviews, and the two of you could man the command central. We will need that. There’s a lot of research to be done on something like this. It would save time splitting our resources.”

Sapphire didn’t look happy, but she finally gave a nod. “As long as that isn’t just your way of trying to push me out, Orville. I have to be doing something, or I’ll go crazy.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “I know. And for what it’s worth, the research is important. I have an estimated time of death for Goldman now, and we know that barn fire started just before midnight. The two of you could start looking at where everybody was when those events happened and piecing things together. Plus, background checks and all that would come in handy too.”

“I think we can handle that.” Patricia looked over at Sapphire. “You’re pretty good on that phone of yours. I’m guessing you and technology get along?”

Sapphire looked at me and swallowed. She knew better than to actually say it. She aced at computer stuff and kitchen work. Me? I was better behind a sewing machine and in the garden. We each had our strengths.

Keen of Orville to play to them.

Not that sewing or gardening strengths helped one whit in an investigation. Which kind of made me the weak link in all this.

And that thought rankled me more than anything.

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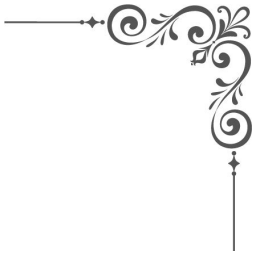

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Chapter 18

The kids and Kimberly made it home shortly after that. We limited the kids to one slice of pizza each so they wouldn't spoil their suppers. When Kimberly and Sapphire started making plans on what to fix for dinner, Patricia looked at me.

"Don't suppose you'd care to give me a lift back to my place? Guess I should have driven myself over here this morning. My brain doesn't seem to be functioning all that well today."

"Well, none of us got all that much sleep last night, so don't be too hard on your brain. And I was planning on making a trip to Oak Hill, anyway." I threw a glance into the kitchen. "But I'm kind of hoping that Sapphire will agree to stay here. I don't think she's going to approve of where I'm going, and I don't want her alone right now."

"I agree, she shouldn't be alone." Patricia hesitated. "I'd stay with her, but there's an angle I kind of want to check into myself, before I start in on the computer."

Orville's ears perked up. "Oh?"

"Sorry, sheriff. Kind of a need to know kind of thing. I just want to take a look around the area where they found Goldman's body. I know the police went over it thoroughly, but I'd still like to see if I can sniff out a clue or two from it. Might catch something they missed."

I felt my eyes go big. Oh, indeed. Why had I not thought to ask Patricia to use that wolfy nose of hers? Now, I was kind of itching to go with her myself. I'd only gotten to see the wolf side to the woman once, and it hadn't lasted near long enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Of course, it wouldn't be that easy to ditch my new partner. Especially when he offered to drive us.

We dropped her off at her little house, and as we pulled out of her drive, Orville glanced over at me. "You said Oak Hill, right?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He turned to the left, and we rode for a minute in silence. Funny, but before a week ago, the silences between me and Orville had never really bothered me. Now they did. Too many things up in the air right now for it to be a comfortable one.

I was just opening my mouth to break it when he beat me to it.

"About tomorrow's date night," he said. I tensed. How could I not? "I'm thinking maybe we should reschedule until the weekend. You've

got enough on your plate without that hovering over your head. Sound fair enough?"

It would still be hovering over my head, but the extension was a welcome boon all the same. "Thank you, Orville. That would be much appreciated."

He gave a grunt. "Figured it might. Guess a few more days waiting for an answer will not kill me." He gave me a crooked grin. "Even if it feels like it might sometimes. You aren't the only one with stress over this, just so you know."

I looked out the window. "I know."

Another brief silence. "So, who are we on our way to see?"

"A friend of Merlin's by the name of Jack." I considered how much to share, but in the end, he needed to know. "Jack is a thief, plain and simple. Kind of a little too proud of that fact, too, if you ask me. He and Merlin have been buddies for a long, long time. Him and Archie not so much."

"And because he's a thief, you think he might be the one that took that journal?"

"I do."

"And what do Sapphire and Merlin think?"

"They don't."

"I see. I'm guessing this visit will just stay between the two of us, then?"

"That would be appreciated, yes. But Sapphire knows how I feel. She's going to realize I would pay Jack a visit sooner rather than later."

The silence was a little easier to bear after that. The air seemed a little easier to breathe too.

We pulled up outside Jack's not too humble abode, and Orville gave a low whistle. "The thieving business is good for this Jack."

"It is." I'd been by Jack's before but never been inside the place. As such, I really didn't have any notion of what to expect. Good thing, too, because I'm thinking I'd have been sorely wrong. Jack, as it turns out, was a complicated man.

He answered the door, and the perfectly groomed gentleman that I'd come to know was gone. His clothes were wrinkled, his hair was standing on end, and there was more than a faint trace of magic clinging to him.

We'd obviously caught him in the middle of a spell.

Jack blinked at us. Finally, he found his voice. "Opal. I certainly didn't expect to see you on my doorstep."

"And yet here I am. May we come in?"

He glanced at Orville, who just so happened to still be in his sheriff's uniform. If that made the man uncomfortable, he wasn't

showing it. He seemed more bothered by my presence than that of an actual lawman. Funny, that.

Jack gave a couple more blinks before finally stepping out of the doorway to let us pass. “Please forgive the mess. I’ve been rather… preoccupied lately.”

My eyes were drawn to a small black cauldron sitting on his long kitchen counter. It was surrounded by magical ingredients. “Sorry if we’ve interrupted a spell. Anything I can help with?”

He swallowed and shook his head. “I wish I could say yes, but I’ve tried everything under the sun, and nothing is working.”

Color me curious. “What is it you’re trying to do?”

“A find spell.”

Even more curious. Those were actually pretty simple spells. I usually kept a few all mixed up and at hand, just in case. In fact, I had one in my bag. Kind of concerned me if a master of stealth spells couldn’t even do a simple find.

“I’m fairly decent at those,” I said, going for modesty. “In fact, if you’ll tell me what it is you’re trying to find, I might just be able to help.”

Jack took a deep breath, then glanced up at Orville. “I will gather this man can be trusted? I don’t know him, you know. That uniform means nothing to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Orville said, holding out his hand. “I’m Orville Taylor, and I’m on vacation at the moment. Pay no attention to the clothes.”

Jack arched an eyebrow at him. “I generally don’t, unless the clothes come with a warrant. I take it that’s not the case today, though.”

Orville chuckled. “Nope. No warrant today. And as long as you keep your… business out of my county, you’re out of my jurisdiction, anyway.”

“Good.” Then Jack’s eyes turned back to me. With a very calculating look. “Are you Ravenswinds as good as people say you are?”

I just looked at him. “That would depend on what people say, wouldn’t it? But you can trust that we know our way around a spell.”

He nodded. “Then, as much as I hate to admit it, I might be able to use your help with this after all.”

Jack led me over to the counter, then pointed down to a rather fancy, and most likely expensive, fountain pen and a small amulet. “Those are both Archie’s. The pen is from his desk—and yes, Merlin knows I have it—and the amulet is a safety spell Archie did as a pocket token for me.” He shook his head. “I know Archie and I have our differences.” Jack glanced at Orville. “But I highly respect him. He’s a good man and a good friend, and he doesn’t deserve what the

council is doing to him."

"I agree." Then I looked pointedly at the items on the counter. "But he's not exactly missing, you know. I saw him just this morning."

"It isn't him I'm looking for." Jack brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. He really did look like he'd been at this for a while. Finally, his eyes met mine. "I'm looking for that bloody spell journal. If I can find it..."

Okay, now he had my interest. "Then we would know who is behind all of this."

"Exactly. Only, I'm not having much luck. I've tried just about everything I can think of too."

My early hope dashed on the rocks. "It's hard to find a magical item. You'd pretty much have to search out Archie's signature."

Jack nodded sadly. "Yes. And I'm afraid our dear friend Archimedes has been casting spells all over Oak Hill and the surrounding area. There just isn't a way to pinpoint the book. At least not one that I can come up with, obviously. And believe me, it's not for lack of trying."

I looked the man deep in his eyes. And I believed him. He really was trying to help. Jack the thief wasn't our man.

"Do you have any ideas?"

I shook my head. "None that come to mind. That book will hide in plain sight with as much magic as Archie throws around."

Jack took a deep breath and sank onto a stool at the counter, his head in his hands. "Then I'm fresh out of ways to help. They're always there for me. And I can't even return the favor when they need help the most."

"Getting the shaman's friend in to see that spell mark was a whole lot of help, if you ask me." I saw Orville's eyebrow go up. I'd have to explain that one later. "And just being there for moral support to Merlin in all this helps too. We'll get this straightened out. I promise."

He nodded but didn't even look up.

Orville and I saw our own way out.

For once in his life, Jack was innocent.

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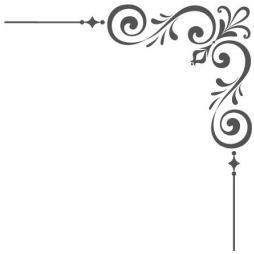

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Chapter 19

"We got time for one more stop before heading back to your house?"

"Depends. You do know my sister is cooking, right? I'm getting hungry just thinking about that." And that was even after stuffing myself with pizza just a couple of hours earlier.

"Think she'll keep it warm for us?"

It was Sapphire. Of course she would. "Yes. So where are we heading?"

"I was thinking we should pay a visit to the Goldmans. Something isn't quite right there. I think this whole thing started with Mark Goldman's murder. The time of death agrees with that too."

"You think this is all about trying to pin the murder on Archie? That didn't work too well for them. That mark is fake."

"I know. But I still have the feeling that there is something there. Why Goldman? Who is tied to him and to Archie? Maybe Fran and Shyla will have some answers."

"Okay, then, but we have to stop by the market first."

"We do?"

I spared him one of my signature looks. He was, after all, a man. He might not know these things. "We do. You don't go to a grieving mother's house without food. Regardless of your reason for going." I looked at his uniform. "I do wish you'd changed first, though."

He glanced down at his brown uniform. "You have a point. I have a change of clothes in the trunk. While you go in to do your shopping, I'll run over to the gas station and change."

A half an hour later, we were standing on Fran's front porch with the largest roasted chicken the deli had, plus a large tub of mashed potatoes, and another of green beans.

Fran opened the door. Her eyes were puffy and red, and when she looked down at the food, a few more tears leaked out. "Thank you. This is very kind of you. Please come in."

She took the food and placed it on the dining room table. "The food is much appreciated. I'm afraid I haven't felt much like cooking since..."

I patted her shoulder and led her over to the sofa. "We understand. This had to come as quite a shock."

Fran nodded. “It has. But then, I knew something was wrong when Mark went missing like he did. He just wouldn’t do that.” She looked away. “At least not without telling me.”

Orville sat on a chair facing the sofa. “Mark got involved in that robbery, didn’t he?”

The tears started gaining speed, and she shook her head. “I don’t know anymore. At first, I’d have said he didn’t have a thing to do with it, but now?”

“Mom doesn’t want to think anything bad about Mark.” That was Shyla, coming in from the kitchen with an armful of bottled waters. “But the truth is, yes, I think he had something to do with it.” She sat down next to her mother and sat the drinks on the coffee table.

“Was he friends with Flynn Tomlin?” Orville asked.

Shyla considered that for a moment as she opened a water for her mom and handed it to her. “Drink, Mom. You need to stay hydrated.” Then she turned back to Orville. “I wouldn’t say they were friends, exactly, but they went to high school together. And when Mark’s wife left him, he lost pretty much everything in the divorce.” She grimaced. “That happens when you can’t keep it in your pants.”

“Shyla!”

“Sorry, Mom. But you know it’s true. Mark had a good thing going with Carol, and he screwed it up.” She looked up at me, the only one left standing. “My brother wasn’t known for making the best of decisions. I’d hoped that the promotion at the bank would change that.”

“I wish he’d never left the accounting firm. People don’t kill accountants.”

“Was Mark acting any differently before he went missing? Did Flynn ever visit him here?” Orville asked.

Shyla covered her mom’s legs with an afghan from the back of the sofa, and Fran’s fingers started worrying at the yarn. “He seemed nervous and a little distracted, yes. But with the investigation, he would be, wouldn’t he?”

“That would be enough to make any man nervous, I think,” Orville agreed. “And Flynn?”

Fran shook her head. “I haven’t seen Flynn in the past couple of years. I had thought Mark was through with him.”

“Was there something in their past that caused them to fall out?”

Fran’s lips thinned out. “You know, I’m kind of tired right now.” She stood up. “But I thank you for the food.”

Shyla walked us to the door. Glancing back at her mom, she lowered her voice. “Flynn got Mark in trouble several years ago. A senior prank gone wrong. But they were both underage, and nothing really ever came from it.” She hesitated. “And I want to thank you for

the food too. Things are tight right now, what with a funeral coming up and everything."

"Check with the bank. I'm fairly certain they'd have life insurance on their president," Orville said.

She nodded. "They would. But if it comes out that Mark had anything to do with that robbery? Well, I really don't think we'll see a dime of it."

WE WERE WELL ON THE way to the farmhouse before Orville turned to me. "What do you think?"

My gaze was still out the window. My heart had gone out to Shyla and her mother more than I wanted to let on. Still, the man asked me a question. "I think there will be a big box of food delivered to the Goldmans very soon."

He grunted. "Let me know when you go shopping. I'll either contribute money or add a big box of my own. No problem." He paused. "But what I meant was, what do you think about Mark being involved in those robberies?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure I see him as involved with all of them, but the one at his bank? Yeah, I kind of think that's a given at this point. Doesn't exactly help Archie's client though, does it?"

"Nope. Not at all. Archie doesn't really think he can get Flynn off, does he? I mean, provided we get him back in the office, of course."

"Oh, we'll get him back all right." I hesitated. Had Archie asked us to keep the whole going on the run thing a secret? I couldn't remember. But then again, at this point, did it really matter? "If it ever really goes to court."

He shot me a glance. "You saying what I think you're saying? Flynn is going to jump bail?"

Another shrug. "The court had to know the boy was a flight risk, right? But they gave him the option to bond out, anyway. That's on them, in my opinion."

"And you don't know for a fact that's what he's planning?"

"I do not." That much was true. Archie had said he had a feeling. Witches' feelings were usually right, but they weren't facts until, well, after the fact.

"This whole thing is getting complicated, isn't it?"

"Agreed. But I think you're right about the Goldman murder figuring into it. I just can't see how. Or why someone would want to pin it on Archie. The man is practically a saint from what I can tell."

He grinned at me. "That drives you just a little nuts, doesn't it? Him not having a huge fault that you can rub in Sapphire's face?"

I took a deep breath and released it. "I didn't say he was

completely without fault. The man is an Earth witch, you know."

Orville's grin stayed in place. "I heard Earth witches were great at healing and protection spells. That sounds pretty awesome to me."

It would. But I knew he was baiting me, and I wasn't going to go for it. Not tonight. It had been far too long of a day. "Not as awesome as Air."

He chuckled but dropped it. My man knew how far to push me. Or not.

"We calling it a day, then? Gonna eat dinner and then early to bed and back at it fresh in the morning?"

I looked at him. "I'm willing if you are. But I think as partners, we should keep each other informed of what we're doing. Professional courtesy and all."

His face fell just the tiniest of bits. Yeah, don't ever think I don't know how my man thinks. Right now, I was betting he was really wanting a few words with Flynn Tomlin. And he was planning to ditch me before he got them too. Not happening if I had anything to say about it.

Partners were partners, dang it all.

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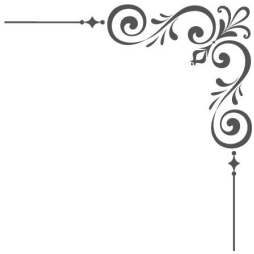

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Chapter 20

By the time we ate supper, which Sapphire had indeed kept warm for us, and saw Orville off home, I was beat. The very last thing I wanted to do was to make another drive into Oak Hill to take Sapphire home.

Followed by another restless night in a strange bed. It wasn't my idea of a good time.

She must have sensed that too. But I think baby Pearl helped seal the deal.

"I guess it wouldn't look too bad if I spent one night here," Sapphire said. "Would it?"

"Don't think it would look bad at all. Even if you moved back in here until this entire thing was over and done."

She shook her head. "I'm not doing that, Opal." Then she looked down at baby Pearl in her arms. She had insisted on giving her the last bottle of the day. "But one night, I think I can handle."

Baby Pearl was fighting sleep for all she was worth, but it was a losing battle. Of course, she'd wake up with the whole diapering and ready for bed process. But it wouldn't last long.

"Do you think Kimberly would mind if Pearl slept down here with us tonight?"

I chuckled. "You can ask her, but if it means getting an entire night of uninterrupted sleep, I'm thinking she'd be okay with it. You know there's still a midnight feeding involved, right?"

Sapphire nodded. "I'll take that one too. It's been too long since I've held a baby in my arms, Opal. I'm getting rather impatient with Amie and Opie, you know. I'm ready for grandchildren."

Goddess help me. Grandchildren. That was all I needed to add to my plate right now.

"Give them time, sister. They haven't been a couple all that long, you know."

"Not officially, maybe, but you know as well as I do that those two were fated to be together right from the very start."

No argument from me on that one. It was true. For what it was worth, Opie had come to that same conclusion quite some time ago. It had taken Amie a lot longer to get past the whole friends only thing.

I went upstairs to say goodnight to the others and tuck Nancy and

Mason into bed. It was my nightly tradition. I'd missed that last night too. Didn't feel right going to sleep without it. Not that last night involved all that much sleep.

By the time I came back down, Sapphire and baby Pearl were in my little apartment. I'd rather expected baby Pearl to be pretty much zonked out by now. But no. She was wide-eyed when she saw me enter the room.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I washed the kids' capes and that material for you to get out that mothball smell. You are doing one for Mason, Nancy, and Sassy, right?"

I shivered at the mention of Sassy but nodded. "Thanks, and yes. Shouldn't take long to sew them up tomorrow. Especially as I'm using the Halloween capes as a base for them. Well, the two bigger ones, anyway." Sassy's would have to be made from scratch. I glanced over at the small heap of fabric with a sigh. "Although, I really should do it tonight. I'm running out of time. That contest is only a week away."

"I've seen you at that sewing machine of yours, you know. It won't take you long. Tonight, you need your rest."

"We both do."

She nodded but seemed more than a little distracted.

"Is something wrong?" Well, more than the wrong that I already knew about. Although now that I thought about it, that was probably enough to distract anyone. Let alone a loving wife.

"You really don't like having Sassy in the house, do you?"

Oh, Goddess, not this again. Mom and Sapphire had always tried to convince me that my fear of the stupid dolls was unfounded. But dang it, they hadn't been in the backyard that night, had they?

"Time to fess up." That didn't come from any of the humans in the room. It came from Bridget, my Macaw. The blood running through my veins cooled a few degrees instantly. I threw Sapphire a quick glance to see if it had the same effect on her.

It did. Not that she met my gaze. Her eyes were on baby Pearl. Rightly so too.

When baby Pearl was born, I recognized her as having our mother's soul. But I had thought, quite wrongly as it was turning out, that the soul had quickly forgotten who and what she had been.

Apparently, that wasn't the case.

My mother had always had a very special way with familiars. All witches do, in their own way, but Mom? It was kind of like her super power. And she and Bridget had been close. Very close.

Sapphire's gaze was locked with baby Pearl's. Bridget repeated, "Time to fess up, Butterfly."

I swallowed. Butterfly. If there had been any doubt as to who was behind Bridget's words, that one word ended it. Mom had always

called us Butterfly when she was trying to drive home a point.

Sapphire looked from baby Pearl to Bridget and back again. As if she was unsure who to address. I could understand that. It was a complicated situation.

"You told me never to tell." In the end, she spoke directly to baby Pearl.

"I wasn't right," Bridget said.

Another nail in the coffin of 'this can't be real'. To my knowledge, our mother had never said she was wrong in her entire adult life. At least she hadn't since the two of us had been old enough to remember. The closest she would come to it was 'I wasn't right'.

Slowly, Sapphire's eyes turned to me. She swallowed. "Please don't hate me. I just couldn't bear that. And I really wanted to tell you, you know. But Mom said you'd never forgive me. And I didn't want to risk that. It's hounded my conscious for years."

"This has to do with Dolly, doesn't it?"

She nodded, her eyes moist. "Yes. I know you remember that night in the backyard, but do you remember earlier that day?"

I thought back but had to shake my head. "Sorry, that night kind of wiped whatever else happened that day clean out of my mind."

"I kind of thought that was the case. But just to refresh your memory, that was the day you did your first Karma spell. On Jimmy Vincent. He had asked me to the school dance, and you thought he had something nasty in mind, so you threw a spell at him."

"I was right too, you know. That big zit on the end of his nose kind of proved it, didn't it? Karma only hits when there's a reason."

Sapphire gave me a look. "You have no way of knowing whether or not that spell had anything to do with his intentions toward me. But after that, he canceled the date. And it was a full year before any other boy got up the courage to ask me out too."

It was all I could do not to squirm. She'd never told me how she felt about any of this before. "I'm sorry. I was only trying to look out for you."

"I know that now, but then? Then I was angry. Really, really angry. I wanted to take you down a peg or two. And I knew you didn't like Dolly to begin with."

By now, I'd kind of figured out the confession part of things. "You spelled Dolly to come out to visit me that night, didn't you?"

That night had been the most terrifying night of my life. And that was saying a lot.

I'd been trying to get closer to the Goddess, so I had decided to spend the night in the backyard hammock. Nothing between me and my Goddess but a thick blanket and the light of the moon.

The light of the moon came back to bite me, though. You've never

experienced terror until you've seen a ventriloquist doll stalking you in the shadows of moonlight.

It's the first time I ever remember screaming. I'm not proud of it, but I screamed to beat the band. It took Mom longer than I would have thought to get to me too.

No way was I going past that doll to get into the house. I had run around to the front door and was whamming on it for them to let me in, when Mom finally got to me.

She took me by the hand and dragged me back to the hammock. The doll was gone. Mom had tried to convince me that it had all been a bad dream. But I knew better. It had been real.

I'd been wide awake. And I'd seen that doll walk with my very own two eyes.

Sapphire took a deep breath. "I did. And I'm sorry. You were always so unshakeable. When I saw how totally freaked out you were, I wanted to tell you." She glanced down at baby Pearl, who was softly snoring. She must have thought her part of this was done. The rest was for us two sisters to figure out.

"But Mom stopped you." As much as I hated to admit it, that might have been pretty darn smart of Mom. I was young and a whole lot more reckless with my magic back then. I could very well have done something stupid that would have damaged our sisterhood forever.

Besides, thinking back on that zit and the lack of dates, I probably did have it coming. I mean, how would Sapphire have known I would take the prank that hard?

Sapphire nodded. "Can you forgive me?"

I swallowed. "I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me."

She looked at me and smiled. "That is so a deal." Then she hesitated. "So, do you feel better about Sassy now?"

The shiver was still an instant thing.

"Guess not, huh?"

I shook my head. "If you remember, I didn't like the darn dolls before that night. I don't think that's about to change anytime soon." I smiled at her. "But I'll work on it. Nancy really does like that darn thing."

"She's good with it too. Much better than I ever was."

I felt a twinge of pride. "She is. You know she and Mason have an actual chance to win that talent contest. Their act is coming together nicely."

"So, we're okay?" She seemed to need confirmation. With my reputation for Karma spells, I can't say I blamed her. Not that I'd ever send one to family.

"We're okay."

Shoot, we were better than okay. The weight of that night had

been with me for decades. It was mighty nice to have it finally lifted off my shoulders.

It kind of felt like I could conquer the world right now. But I'd settle for bringing Archie home.

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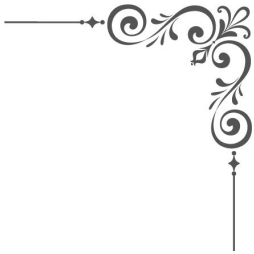

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Chapter 21

At least we rested well that night. Or at least I did. Baby Pearl even took it easy on us and slept through the whole night. Her very first time doing that too.

Not that I was complaining.

Bridget woke me with her demand for food. That bird was better than any alarm clock. I fed her, went to the restroom, and then started a bottle for baby Pearl. I barely had it warmed when Nancy met me in the kitchen, rubbing her eyes. She always insisted on giving baby Pearl her first meal of the day.

She reached out for the bottle. “Thanks, Mom.” She took the bottle and went in to collect baby Pearl. I watched her climb the stairs back up to her room with the baby in her arms.

All I could do was watch. I greatly feared if I tried to move or speak, I would shatter with all the emotion I was feeling.

Nancy had called me Mom. That was huge.

I’m not sure how long I stood there with my gaze up those stairs, but eventually Sapphire came in search of her first hot cup of caffeine for the day.

“Are you okay, Opal? Did something happen?”

I shook my head. As big of a deal as this was to me, I didn’t want to spoil it by letting the others in on it. This was between Nancy and me. But dash it all, the girl had called me Mom. It was like the opening of a door in our relationship. A big thick door too. One that led into a mansion of possibilities.

Forcing myself to come back to earth, which wasn’t easy, I asked Sapphire to go ahead and put a full pot on. I had a feeling, good night’s rest or not, we would need it.

The day promised to be a full one.

I hesitated to call Patricia this early, but the truth was, I was simply too curious to wait. She picked up on the first ring.

“I kind of figured you all would be up early, what with a baby in the house and all,” she said.

“Seven days a week. I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Nope. When I’m working a case, I don’t sleep all that much. I crash pretty hard when it’s over, though. Once we get Arch home, don’t think I’m trying to avoid you, okay? I’ll just be sleeping for a day

or two."

"Got it." I paused for just a second. "You have any luck sniffing out a clue last night?"

Patricia blew out a breath through the phone. "Unfortunately, no. It would have gone a whole lot better if I could have gotten there earlier. But with the police, the crime scene investigators, the coroner and his crew? There were way too many scents to get a lock on one that shouldn't have been there."

"Well, dang."

"Dang, indeed." There was a brief silence. "Opal, can I call you back? The council is calling me."

We hung up just as Sapphire's phone went off. I fairly ran for it. She met me halfway to retrieve it. A glance at the screen showed Archie's name.

"Patricia's taking a call from the council. Something's up."

Sapphire swiped the phone to pick up the call. "Are you okay?"

She listened for a minute before I got impatient and motioned to my ear. I wanted to hear the conversation too, dang it. She hit the speaker button as Archie was in mid-sentence.

"... my spell journal with a note confessing to taking it. The note wasn't signed, so we still don't know who took it. But the good news is that the council should have to let me go now."

Personally, I was thinking he was giving the council, and namely Crystal, far too much credit. There really did need to be some changes in our ruling body. Soon, too.

"That's wonderful, Archie! I'll be up to get you as soon as I can get dressed and get Opal's keys."

He laughed. "I'm eager to get home too. But you might want to wait until I get the official word that they're cutting me loose. I wouldn't want you to waste a trip."

"If I see you, it wouldn't be a waste, dear." She paused. "But I understand what you're saying. Call me just as soon as you get the word, okay?"

"I will. Love you, Saff."

"Love you too, Archie."

They had barely hung up when my phone went off. It was a three-ring circus of cell phones. Patricia. I hurriedly answered. "The council is letting him go, right?"

"No. They are not."

Crap.

"But Archie just called and said they delivered the spell journal to the council with a confession. What right can they possibly have now to hold him?"

"The note wasn't signed, Opal. According to Crystal, one of us

could have sent the journal and note to try to clear Arch."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"Unfortunately, I'm not. Crystal will drag this out for as long as humanly possible. I think she sees it as a way to get back at the Minehearts and Ravenswinds for their role in last month's little fiasco."

"Our role? We bloody well saved the council!" Not to mention, quite possibly, the entire world. "How can she fault us for that? She should be thanking us!"

"Well, that isn't her view on things. She's still thoroughly ticked off that we didn't bring her in on the take-down."

"How could we when we thought she might be behind the whole thing?"

"I know that and you know that. Crystal? She can't comprehend it." A brief pause. "And now poor Arch is paying the price. At this point, I don't know what it will take to get her to cut him loose."

I glanced over at my sister, who was still dancing around the room, confident that everything would be back to normal by nightfall. I hated to be the one to break the bad news to her.

"This has to end."

"Agreed. Today is definitely the day to pull out all the stops. I say we visit every single person on that list. But first, I think a trip to the council is in order. I want to see that journal and note myself."

"We're at the farmhouse. You coming to us?"

"Already on my way. See you in about fifteen."

I disconnected the call and took a deep breath. Then I walked over to my still dancing sister and put one hand on each of her shoulders. "Sapphire, there's good news and bad news."

She stopped dancing, and her face went flat. "They aren't letting him go, are they?"

I shook my head. "They are not."

Sapphire didn't question me. For one, she knew that I wasn't the one with definitive answers on that. "And the good news?"

"We're doubling down our efforts today. We aren't going to stop until we can shove proof of Archie's innocence under Crystal's nose. Proof that even she can't deny."

She nodded, but she really didn't take it as good news. I might have oversold that part of things. It was only mediocre news at best. I mean, it's not like anything was really changing. We'd been giving this our all ever since the council took Archie.

We weren't about to stop now.

WE WORKED AS A TEAM getting the kids up, fed, and ready for

school. Sapphire took over the breakfast part of things. Usually, weekday mornings at the farmhouse meant cereal, toast, and orange juice. Not with my sister in residence. But truthfully, I wasn't complaining.

One, her food was always good. And two, it helped to distract her for a while. Sometimes, distraction was a good thing. Like when a crazy witch with a grudge was holding your husband for ransom.

A ransom without demands that we could meet. Yet. That would change.

Orville arrived just as Kimberly was leaving with the kids. I'd called him beforehand, so he knew exactly what he was walking into.

"We still splitting up today?" I asked. One person couldn't be in two places at the same time, and I knew that he really wanted a talk with Flynn. Hence the question.

He shook his head. "Not at first, no. I want a gander at that journal and note."

"What about Flynn?"

Orville took a deep breath. "The boy alibied out. I ran the time of death by the Oak Hill jail. When Goldman was murdered, Flynn Tomlin was still sitting in their county jail. You just can't get a stronger alibi than that." He looked glum. "Good thing I'm not a betting man, because after talking to Fran and Shyla last night, I'd have put good money on that boy being the killer."

"As would I. So, back to square one, are we?"

"Looks like."

Even though we were all going to the same place, we took two cars. I kind of thought Sapphire would dig in her heels about staying with Archie a lot longer than they had allowed us to last time. And the rest of us had work to do.

Patricia took Sapphire with her. I rode with my man.

"Any other good suspects you all are looking at?" he asked.

I thought about it. "Well, before all this with Goldman and Flynn came up, we were looking pretty strong at Daniel Davis. He's a young upstart of an attorney trying to get his foot in the door at the firm."

Orville arched an eyebrow at me. "Merlin could use the help right now, couldn't he?"

"He could. If the boy was competent as a lawyer. Which I highly doubt. I think the boy is sadly lacking in street smarts. An attorney's got to have more than book smarts to handle cases in court."

"Yes, they do. But if he isn't street smart, he wouldn't know that, would he?"

"He would not."

"So, after we visit with Archie and see what there is to see, if nothing jumps out to lead us in another direction, we go to see Mr.

Davis?”

“That’s a plan.”

The rest of the way, we rode in silence. We were both all caught up on the entire Archie thing now, and we wouldn’t know where to go next until we saw what that parcel the council received contained. Hopefully, whoever was behind all this would have been nice enough to leave us a clue.

If not, Daniel Davis was back up to bat.

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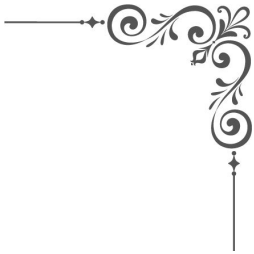

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Chapter 22

When we finally got shown in to see Archie, he wasn't alone. And it wasn't just the Shaman with him, either. Merlin was there, huddled with Archie in a corner of the room going over paperwork.

He looked up as we entered, then bent back down to his task.

Sapphire, the dutiful wife if ever there was one, didn't interrupt them. But she did sit next to her husband and put her arm around his waist. After all, she had come a considerable way to see him.

Luckily, it looked like they were wrapping things up. It didn't take long before Merlin started gathering the papers back up to go into his briefcase.

And if they were done, I had a burning question to ask.

"What happened with young Davis and that interview yesterday?"

Merlin looked at me. And if ever a man looked guilty as sin, he did. "He's not the one behind this."

I frowned at him. "You do know that now we've ruled out Flynn Tomlin, Davis is our best suspect, right? What makes you so sure?"

Color rose to Merlin's cheeks, and he gave a sideways glance to the Shaman who was sitting quietly off to the side to give us all the illusion of privacy. Such as that was. No way would the council let us be alone with the man.

It rather surprised me that Crystal hadn't changed the guard. But then, knowing the Shaman, she had probably tried. And been unsuccessful too.

"I will say that I know the boy to be innocent. I'd even swear to it," his voice dropped considerably, "on my magic."

My eyebrows flew upward and, Goddess help me, but I glanced over to the Shaman too. He was still just as calmly reading as he had been before. That was good. Either he hadn't been paying attention to our conversation (ha!), or he hadn't gotten the full meaning behind Merlin's words.

Or perhaps he had. After all, sometimes rules are meant to be broken.

Because I was fairly certain from Merlin's flushed face and his words that the man had cast a truth spell on Davis. It would have been the easiest and surest way to get to the bottom of things.

Unfortunately, truth spells, along with love spells, were strictly

forbidden by the council. Using magic to manipulate another person's mind or emotions was a big no-no in the witch world. That's one of the reasons you should be very leery of bottled love spells. They're all as useful as lipstick on a pig. Because no true witch with the ability to brew one would take the risk.

We all (minus poor Orville, who most likely didn't have a clue what Merlin's words meant) stared hard at Patricia.

She fidgeted, then shrugged. "You gotta do what you gotta do."

This from a council enforcer? Oh yes, she was an ex-enforcer now, wasn't she? But somehow, I thought that maybe her words spoke to more than just her current status. I thought that just maybe, in Patricia's past, she might have bent those rules herself.

Not that I bloody well cared, because to me, the woman was right as rain. You gotta do what you gotta do.

Bottom line, we were fresh out of suspects. Daniel Davis wasn't our man, after all, and Flynn Tomlin had just about the best alibi a man could have. We needed another look at that list of suspects. Not that I expected it to yield any better results than we'd already gotten from it at this point.

I dug the list out of my bag and turned to Archie. "Have you given any thought to anyone else that might have had access to your office and that blasted journal? Anyone not already on our list?"

He shook his head. "I can't think of a single other soul. As I've said before, the office is my private domain. I don't meet with clients there. That's what the conference rooms are set up for. Besides the whole privacy thing, they have the recording equipment already set up and ready to go."

"Okay. Did you ever meet with Flynn Tomlin in your office?"

Archie just looked at me like I was repeating myself or something. "He was a client, so no. We held all of our meetings in the conference rooms."

Something about his words struck a nerve, and a tiny door opened in my brain. "What about his dad?"

I heard Patricia suck in a big breath of air, even as all eyes turned to Archie.

"As he is an old friend and not a client, yes, I met with him in my office."

"And do you remember ever seeing your spell journal after your last meeting with him?"

He looked away. "I do not." He paused, closing his eyes. "Goddess help me."

He might have said more, but I couldn't tell you if he did. I was too busy jogging out the door after my man.

Once we were buckled in, Orville spared me a glance. "This was all

about biding time to let them escape. And it just might have worked. How much you want to bet that we are about to visit an empty house?"

"No bet here. I think that's a fair assumption." I hesitated. "It's also a fair assumption that if we can't track them down before they leave the country, Archie's confinement will not be a short one. We need to end this."

Orville nodded. "Plus, the whole getting justice for Mark Goldman and the others in this whole mess."

I thought back to Fran and Shyla and their turned upside-down lives. "Yeah. That too."

We were wrong about one thing. The Tomlin house wasn't totally empty when we got there. A maid answered the door.

"I'm sorry. The Tomlin's left this morning to visit Mrs. Tomlin's sister in Georgia."

Sure, they did. Only one minor problem with that statement. By the terms of the bond, Flynn Tomlin wasn't allowed to leave the state. They were running, all right. And time was running out for Archie.

Orville turned to go back toward the car, but my witch's intuition kicked into gear big time. I grabbed his elbow to stop him, then turned to the maid.

"Look, I will be honest and upfront with you. The Tomlins aren't planning to come back, and I need to get into their house for a few minutes. I won't take anything valuable, but I need to look around. They have caused a lot of trouble for my family, and I need to stop them. Please. Will you help?"

She looked at me and then at Orville. Finally, she nodded and stepped back. I kind of thought that meant that she knew my words were true. Whether they'd told her they were gone for good, or not, the girl still knew it.

As we walked in, Orville whispered in my ear. "Mind telling me what this is about? Time is important, you know."

"Believe me, I'm aware of that." I turned to the maid. "Where is their downstairs bathroom?"

She pointed to a door, and I walked over and entered. The size of the room was approximately the size of my entire apartment at the farmhouse. The Tomlins didn't live small. And before you start to wonder why they were willing to leave all this, I'll tell you. That bond to get Flynn out of jail hadn't come cheap, even with Archie's help. This house would belong to the bond agent in very short order. Unless, of course, we stopped them. At that point, who knows what would become of the place?

My eyes searched the room and finally fell to a hairbrush on the large marble counter. I called back to the maid. "Does any of the staff

ever use this bathroom?"

She spoke from the doorway. "Never. We have our own, much smaller facility."

I'd figured as much, but I had to be sure all the same. Reaching down, I plucked several strands of hair from the brush and then walked out.

After thanking the maid, we got back in the car.

While I'd been collecting the hair, Orville had been on the phone. This wasn't his jurisdiction, that is true, but my man is a lawman through and through. He called in the local authorities to alert them to what we knew.

"You okay if I head to the airport now?" he asked. "Or do you need more hair or something?"

"Go ahead. I can do this on this road."

His eyes widened as I took out the spell bag and dropped in the hair. But he wasn't waiting around for the result, either. We were almost to the interstate on-ramp to the airport when the spell kicked in.

Heading the opposite direction.

"Not the airport, Orville. What's behind us?"

He thought for a second, even as he gave a curse and did a quick U-turn. "The train station. I should have thought of that. With all the extra security at airports, they must not have been sure they could get Flynn on board. A train is easier."

As it happened, we were in Orville's squad car, and jurisdiction or no, he turned on the lights and siren. Good thing, too. Giving people fair warning when my man was on a run was a good thing.

He kept his eyes on the road ahead of us. Mine were on that thin blue line of magic.

Lucky for us, both were going the same way.

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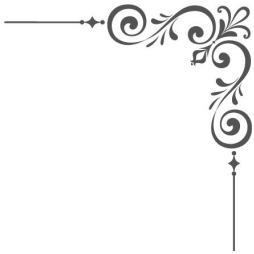

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Chapter 23

In a way, it was much easier on us that the Tomlins had headed for a train rather than an airplane. The chances of finding them in a crowded airport when we had absolutely no idea where they were headed to would have been very hard indeed.

The train station? One lobby. One building. And as luck would have it, the particular train that the Tomlins were waiting for just so happened to be running late.

It took Orville all of three minutes to flash his badge at the clerk at the window and get their location. The train might have been running late, but it was already loaded and about to pull out of the station.

Orville took off like a shot, headed for the tracks. I was behind him, but quickly being outdistanced. I really hoped he wasn't about to do something stupid, like jump on that moving train.

Stupid, because I knew for a fact that my slower and more out of shape body would never make it in time to do the same.

But he didn't jump on the train. That wasn't, however, the good news you might think it was. No. He kept running until he was in front of the dang thing. Then he calmly stepped onto the tracks.

Granted, it wasn't up to full speed yet, but still. The man stepped in front of a train that was moving. With his arm outstretched and badge in hand too. Like that would make one whit of a difference to a moving train.

If luck were with us, it might, however, hold some weight with the engineer at the helm. Or whatever the heck you call the steering mechanism of a train. If he was actually looking at the tracks in front of his locomotive. Which didn't seem to be the case. And Orville showed no sign of backing down and moving either.

My brain wasn't working quite right at the moment. And yes, my mind was busy searching for a spell and wishing like all get out that my all-powerful Light Witch of a niece, Amie, was here beside me. If anyone could stop a moving train with magic, it would be that girl.

Unfortunately, all Orville had was little old me.

There were things I could have done, yes. But all the things I could readily think of, like magically warping the tracks or something of that nature, might cause an even worse result. If that were possible. The train could derail, and I, as a witch, would never see the light of

day ever again.

Crystal would dearly love that.

My mind went again to Amie, and the words Light Witch hit me like a ton of bricks. Light!

Normally, when you're about to do a spell, you simply open yourself up to magic and let it come to you naturally. But then, normally, one isn't about to see the man one loves crushed beneath a behemoth locomotive. I threw myself wide to the magic and started pulling with all my might. Then I put all that power into the biggest light spell I could manage.

It might not have been as big as a nuclear explosion, but it was close. I think the Goddess had my back on this one. I'm powerful, yes, but not that powerful.

For just a few seconds, the world disappeared. There was only light. It was enough to get the engineer's attention all right, and the train slowed and finally came to a full stop. By the time it did so, the Oak Hill police force was already filling in the area by the tracks.

Huh. When had they gotten there?

Pulling that much magic through oneself takes a lot out of a witch. I almost hit the ground before I felt Orville's arms wrap around me. He lifted me into his arms and carried me over to a nearby bench.

"I would have stepped aside, you know."

Would he have? I don't remember thinking that was a possibility. But then, I hadn't been thinking very clearly either. I'd had too many thoughts of a life without Orville flooding my brain. It hadn't been a pleasant feeling.

His eyes met mine. "You okay? I really want to lend a hand and make sure they get them."

I nodded. "Go." The word was harder to say than it should have been, but I meant it all the same. Once I got my feet back under me, I'd join them.

But for now? Sitting was a really good idea.

IT WAS A VERY GOOD thing they didn't need my help for the whole capturing the bad guys thing. Orville and the reinforcements handled that part of the job quite nicely.

Didn't take them all that long, either. Flynn was in custody for breaking bond, which he did as soon as he stepped foot on that train. His father, Archie's dear old rat of a best friend, was sitting right beside him in the back seat of that squad car too.

And I didn't think they'd have much luck getting Archimedes Mineheart on their defense team. Not if my sister Sapphire had anything to say about it.

Come to find out, yes, it had all been about time. Well, at least the framing Archie part of it.

Tomlin had called in his blood-brother pact for one reason and one reason only—to get the trial postponed for long enough to allow him to liquidate enough assets to set up a home in a nice new country. One without extradition pacts with the United States. And, of course, to outfit themselves all with nice new identities too.

They had boarded the train as the Tomlins, but they would have departed at the next station as the Romans.

Archie had done all he could to postpone things, but was still a day short of meeting Tomlin's goal. All this grief for one stinking day.

It had taken Archie disappearing off the face of the earth (as far as the non-witch world was concerned) for Merlin to be able to get that extension from the court.

They might have been planning on holding out for a few days longer, too, but I think they'd pushed their hand more than was wise with alerting the police to Goldman's body. That really upped the stakes there. But without that, we might have been able to work things out without the council getting involved.

Once a dead body dropped, good luck with that. Tomlin must have known that too. Not that he killed Goldman for that. No, Mark had been getting cold feet. He knew the Tomlins were planning to run and had been trying to get a free pass to join them.

Didn't work so well for him.

All this came out within hours. Once Tomlin was under arrest, he cracked hard. Now, he was in even hotter water than his son. And that was saying something.

Once we were through at the police station, which didn't take long as again, this wasn't Orville's jurisdiction, Orville drove me back to the farmhouse.

He'd called Crystal personally to tell her the good news. Well, it was good news for us. Not so much for her.

By the time we reached the farmhouse, Sapphire had called to let me know that Patricia was driving her and Archie home. She sounded happy.

Relieved and happy.

So now, here we were, sitting out in front of the farmhouse in Orville's car. Just sitting there, neither of us reaching for the door handles.

"So, that's pretty much that," Orville said, deliberately not looking at me. "I'd say this whole thing is wrapped up, wouldn't you?"

I nodded, but my heart was in my throat. I was that sure of what was coming next. My time was up, and he was going to want an answer to his proposal. But if anything, all this just reinforced my

feeling that I really couldn't afford to be the one that got in the way of him continuing on as sheriff. What would Wind's Crossing do without him?

Goddess help us all, what if we got someone like Menard in his place? Could I really risk that?

We sat there for a beat or two more in silence. Finally, he turned to me. I took a deep breath, trying to tamper down my emotions. Funny, I never really thought I was the emotional type. When it came to Orville, though, there were emotions aplenty.

"I have some news for you. I want you to hear me out, okay?"

I swallowed but managed to meet his eyes and nod. I didn't trust myself to speak right now.

"I've told you before, Opal, but I'm tired. This last year has been a hard one, and it's brought me to a hard decision. A decision that the last couple of days has firmly reinforced. Don't think this is something I haven't put a lot of thought into, either. I have. A lot of thought. Tons of it."

Another swallow. This sounded serious. I started to open my mouth to prod him forward, but I'd promised to hear him out first. As hard as it was, I had to give him time to say the words in his own time frame.

He glanced out the front window, breaking eye contact. "I'm retiring as sheriff at the end of this term. I'm not running for re-election, Opal. I'm done with this stage of my life."

My emotions flared. So much I wanted to say, and no words came to mind to say them. Good thing too, because he wasn't finished yet.

"I'd been toying with the idea of going into a consultant kind of thing. Like a detective agency or something like that. With my experience, it wouldn't take me long to get licensed and be legal to hang out a shingle and everything. Thing is... I don't want to do it alone."

"Opie?" There. I felt kind of proud of myself. I'd managed to get one word out.

He shook his head. "Not Opie. You." He turned to me again, smiling. "Believe it or not, you kind of have a knack for this kind of thing. Working with you is... invigorating, to say the least. Plus, I know how headstrong you are, and actually working together gives me an opportunity to keep an eye on you. I like that. A lot."

Now I couldn't just not talk, I was having trouble breathing too.

"So, how about it, Opal? Will you be my partner?"

Finally, my words broke free and I could feel the glow start up. "For life and in every possible way, Orville, yes."

He blinked at me. "Does that mean?"

I'd have answered him, but that's kind of hard to do when you're

kissing someone.

I think he got my answer loud and clear all the same.

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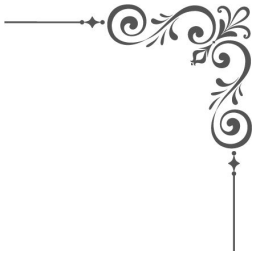

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Epilogue

Funny how I'd been the holdup all along for me and Orville becoming a true couple, and now that title had passed on to him. I was all for him taking the plunge and moving into the farmhouse right away.

Kimberly and the kids were all for it too. Not that I'd thought that would be an issue.

No, the problem was that my man was as old-fashioned as they came, apparently. He wanted a ring on my finger before taking that step. And, as I'd never thought of actually being one to walk down an actual aisle in a wedding dress, well, there were a lot of things to plan.

I never did anything halfway. If I was going to get married, then by golly, I wanted to do it right. Wedding dress, cake, guests—though we had agreed to keep that to just close friends and family—and all the trimmings that went with it.

Would the wedding be in a church? Kind of. My religion's church, anyway. I was holding out for a full moon wedding on the top of our hill. Who could possibly ask for more than that? The perfect time for the Goddess to rain her blessings down on our union too. Full moons were powerful things.

But while we were holding off on the whole living together things, even if it wasn't by my choice, Orville had made darn good and sure that our relationship was no longer a secret in Wind's Crossing. Oak Hill, either, for that matter.

So, as we took our seats for the Wind's Crossing Elementary School talent show the following Monday, there were more than a few people going out of their way to wish us well. More than a few feeling Orville out about his plans for the future too. Those, we were keeping under our hats for a bit longer.

Lots of ducks to get in a row before we went and announced that part of things.

I'd made sure to get there plenty early to snag us four seats in the front row. Orville took the aisle seat, then me, then Kimberly, then Gray. The rest of the family would have been there too, but they were limiting the tickets to two per child. Lucky for us, we had two kids in the show. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been pretty.

But Orville had his fancy, schmancy phone out, fully charged, and

ready to record the kids' part in things for posterity. I was so getting a copy of that. Memories like these are important. Having them on film, even digital film, was a very good thing.

I noticed that Gray had his phone out too. Good. We had a backup plan. Those were always good too.

Some of the acts were pretty good. Enough so that they had me a little worried. I knew how badly the kids wanted to win this. And I'd seen their act, and they were good. Very good. But a couple of the others would give them some real competition.

But I kept telling myself that the people running the show had put Mason, Nancy, and (Goddess help me) Sassy on the docket for last performance for a reason. You always save the showstoppers for last, right?

The lights on the stage dimmed, flickered, and then flashed. With the last bright flash of light, Mason and Nancy were center stage. With nothing more than a small table with an old magician's top hat sitting on it and a stool for Nancy.

When the audience gave a collective gasp at their appearance, I relaxed a little. The kids had this one.

Mason, Nancy, and Sassy had everyone in the palms of their hands.

They only gave each act a ten-minute slot, so there wasn't a second wasted. Mason started off with a few card tricks and some of the standard tricks that had come in that box of magic he'd gotten from Sapphire's attic. He was good, that boy. A true showman. But the real clincher of the act, the one that tied it all together into a true showstopper? Was the team of Nancy and Sassy as the boy's magical apprentices.

It didn't take long before they had the audience rolling in the aisles. A couple of them quite literally, too. This act had appeal for all the ages. And the kids off stage were loving it just as much, if not more, than the adults were.

Finally, with only a blessed few minutes to spare, Mason reached for his hat. Holding it in front of him, he turned the bottom of the hat towards the crowd.

"As you can see, this is just an ordinary old hat. Nothing special about it at all."

Sassy snorted. "Nothing special, my wooden fanny. That there's a magic hat."

"Perhaps," Mason said. "But an ordinary and empty magic hat." He finished showing the audience the apparently empty inside of the hat. Then he sat it back down on the table. "And now, I shall say the magic word and pull from this empty, ordinary..." he threw Sassy a glance "magical hat, a fluffy bunny."

"You're gonna say please?" Sassy asked.

“What?”

“Please is the magic word, right?”

Mason shook his head and shrugged toward the audience. This was what he had to work with, he seemed to say. Every kid in the place giggled. A fair few adults joined in.

“Please is a magic word, yes, but not THE magic word.”

Sassy looked from Mason to the hat and back again. “I wanna pull the bunny out.”

Mason looked at her and then out at the crowd. Then he said, in a stage whisper that he made sure everyone could hear, “We talked about this. I get to pull out the rabbit.”

Sassy shook her head and stood up on Nancy’s knees. A shiver went down my spine. Nancy was a little too good at this. “I wanna pull out the bunny. He likes me better.”

Mason looked torn. If I didn’t already know it was a rehearsed part of the act, I’d really think the request surprised the boy, and disappointed him too. Finally, he took an overly large deep breath.

“Okay, you can pull out the bunny, but I get to say the magic word.”

“Deal,” Sassy said, making her way onto the table to stand beside the hat. We’d worked on a little alteration to Nancy’s cape that hid the fact that her hand guided Sassy’s. With the darker cloth, it was pretty good as far as illusions go.

Mason pulled out his short little bright purple wand, complete with sparkly glitter. Glitter that I would be finding all around the farmhouse for many months to come, I might add. Then he waved the wand over the hat and said loudly, “Abracadabra!”

Sassy’s hand dipped into the hat, and when it came back out, it was holding a bunny all right. But not the small fluffy stuffed bunny that we’d prepared for her to pull out. Instead, there in Sassy’s (really Nancy’s) hand was a small, fluffy, and very much alive, bunny.

The shock was apparent to everyone, and baby Pearl, strapped into her harness on Kimberly’s chest, went into peals of laughter as Nancy tried to contain the small creature. Luckily for the act, people thought it was what was meant to happen. The curtain went down to a standing ovation and thunderous applause.

Of course, that only registered with one small part of my brain. The other part was focused on little baby Pearl.

Oh Goddess, here we go.

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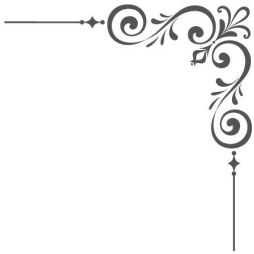

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Witch of a Bride
Witch Reborn 3
By Belinda White

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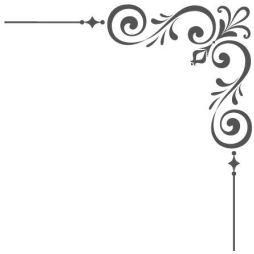

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WITCH OF A BRIDE

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Chapter 1

"YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY DEAD set on a full moon wedding?"

I just looked at him. I didn't think that was unreasonable, the circumstance being what it was. Full moons gave powerful blessings, and in my opinion, it would be only prudent to have our marriage blessed right from the very start.

"I take your silence as a yes."

"Correct." I paused. "You do know my reasons, right?" He should. I mean, I've explained it to him in detail before.

He nodded and sighed. "Yeah, I do. But you do know that limits the days we can actually get married to basically one a month, right?"

Hence our current discussion on the matter. We'd been engaged now going on two whole months, and we still weren't any closer to setting a date for the happy occasion. I'll admit my one requirement of a full moon did put a bit of a hamper on things.

"I still say that Halloween would be perfect. It falls on a Saturday, so a late-night wedding wouldn't inconvenience anyone, and the moon will be full. Perfect, if you ask me."

Now I was the one on the receiving end of the look. He'd gotten pretty good at that Ravenswind look over the years. Even if he wasn't blood-related. Thank the Goddess. If he was, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

"You really want to wait almost half a year to get married? Personally, I'd like something a lot sooner than that."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, considering the options. Full moons didn't just conveniently happen on the weekends. There was always next month, June, when the full moon would at least be on a Friday night. But that was only a month away. Planning a wedding took time.

Orville pulled out his cell phone and brought up a calendar showing the full moons. "How about June 5th? Full moon, Friday... and not almost six months away."

Plus, it wasn't on Halloween night. He'd never really come right out and said it, but I truly felt that was the real issue here. Orville didn't want to be married on Halloween. I couldn't understand why not. If nothing else, it would make forgetting our anniversary practically impossible.

"You know how much work goes into planning a wedding?"

He grinned at me. “Oh, come on, how hard could it possibly be?” Then he sobered a little, his eyes meeting mine with a touch of worry in them. “We are still keeping it to close friends and family, right?”

“That is correct. But even with just a few dozen guests, there are things to be done. We’ll need to arrange food, a wedding cake, invitations, my dress and your tux, someone to officiate...” I could easily have gone on, but he reached out and put a finger on my lips. A pretty effective way to get me to stop talking.

“We make a dang good team, Opal. We can do this. You know we can.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you volunteering to help with the planning?”

The grin was back. “Well, you aren’t the only one getting married, you know. Of course, I’ll help.” He gave a somewhat dramatic pause. “In fact, I’ll take care of the preacher myself.”

That had been one of my early compromises. I had to make some. Orville was right. I wasn’t the only one getting married here. And having a preacher say the words somehow made it ‘official’ in his eyes. Who was I to say no to that?

Besides, to my mind, the Goddess would be the true one giving our marriage her blessing. That was what really mattered to me. Not that she’d be there in all her shining glory. Although, now that I thought about it, that wasn’t outside the realm of possibility. If she did come, though, and there was a preacher involved, I hoped She would add a bit more to her wardrobe. It might not be a bad idea to have a slip on-hand for her, just in case.

Though who in their right mind would be brave enough to ask her to actually wear it?

“I take it you’ve already asked Reverend Castle then?”

“Yup. He was a little shaky about the whole late-night thing, but I got an okay from him all the same. It’s not exactly like we’ll have to compete with another wedding at that time of night, is it? So he should be free.”

I snuggled a little closer into his side as I thought about it. It would be nice to have this on an every night basis. And that wouldn’t happen with my old-fashioned fiancé until we said our 'I do's. Besides, he was right about the whole team thing. Plus, I was pretty sure I could recruit family members to help out too.

“Okay. June 5th it is.” Goddess help me, we were really going to do this thing.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. When I felt his body tense slightly, I knew that something was up. I was right. What can I say? I know my man.

“I have something I probably need to tell you. But first, you have

to promise no magic on this one. I handle it, okay?"

I pulled away enough to see his face. He was dead serious. How did a witch answer that one? A promise for me was set into stone. How could I make a promise before I knew what I was promising not to do?

"As much as I love you, Orville, I don't do blanket promises. I'm gonna need a little something more to go on first."

He reached up to scrub at his chin. "Kind of figured that would be your answer." Well, yeah. My man knew me too.

"And?"

Orville took a deep breath. "Some people at the office aren't all that happy about me getting married."

I laughed and snuggled back in. Like that was news. I'd known that would happen. He had a fair number of female deputies on his small force. It was only reasonable to think more than a few had secret crushes on the man. They couldn't be too happy about the upcoming nuptials at all. Kind of made me glad we had decided on an earlier date, actually.

"Well, that wasn't exactly the reaction I was expecting."

I was still chuckling. "Oh, Orville, you sweet, sweet man. Of course there are people not happy about you getting married." I paused for just a second. "And I'm gonna take a wild way out there guess and say that most of them are female."

His head swiveled down to look at me. "How did you know that?"

The chuckles grew to a full belly laugh. "I'm a woman too. If I found out that you were marrying anybody else but me, I'd be upset too."

He shook his head. "No, that isn't it at all. I think they're more upset that I'm not running for reelection."

Now my laughing stopped. "You thinking about changing your mind on that?"

"No. I've been sheriff of this district long enough." His arm squeezed me a little tighter. "Besides, I honestly can't wait to start our next adventure. Together."

"Me too." I hesitated. "Look, Orville, I honestly don't know how you feel about what you see in the mirror every morning. But you are a very strikingly handsome man." I reached over and squeezed his arm. "Good muscles too. A real catch. Those women are just jealous it isn't them going down that aisle with you. And that's the Goddess's honest truth."

"We'll just have to agree to disagree on that one, Opal."

Made no difference to me. I knew I was the one with the right way of thinking here. But the more I thought about it, the more uncertain I became of the whole situation. I didn't really like the idea of a flock of

females trying to talk my man out of getting married.

Especially that red-headed Trixie he had working on dispatch. Orville had once had a thing for redheads, as evidenced by his very red-headed son, Opie. It wouldn't do to have her pulling out all the stops to get his attention this late in the game.

"I'm also gonna guess that the ringleader in the anti-marriage campaign is Trixie."

He didn't confirm it, but he squirmed. Just a little. Enough to let me know that I had hit the nail dead center on the head.

"Maybe I should go and have a little talk with her?"

"No!" Orville cleared his throat. "I mean, no. As I said, I want you to trust me to handle this." He leaned down and gave me a soft kiss. "Can you trust me to take care of this?"

I took a deep breath and nodded. Trusting him wasn't the problem. Not even a little bit. The problem was trusting that redheaded Trixie.

THE NEXT MORNING, ORVILLE had already left for work before I woke up. Yes, things had changed a little in our relationship. Now that the public at large knew we were a couple, there was no more reason for sneaking around, or for me heading home late at night after our standard Tuesday date night.

Now, I just stayed over. Funny how my old-fashioned beau had a problem with living together, but the odd and end one night here and there was more than fine with him. Made me kind of wonder if he was really as okay with living at the farmhouse as he'd said he was.

But then again, that whole thing had been his idea. I might just be reading too much into things. I did that sometimes.

I stretched out, enjoying the peace and quiet of a morning ritual that didn't involve getting kids and a baby ready to go. One day a week, Kimberly handled that on her own. I'd be missing this once we were actually married. It was kind of nice.

To make it up to Kimberly, I opened the shop on my own Wednesday mornings and gave her the morning off. Her normal routine was to take the kids to school and then run personal errands until time to come in.

Today was a bit different as the older kids were off school for some kind of teacher paperwork day. The bad news was she didn't get those few hours to herself. The good news was they all got to sleep in. It evened out.

I glanced over at the clock. I had another hour before my alarm would go off. As much as I was tempted to roll over and go back to sleep, now that we had an actual wedding date, there were things I needed to get a jump on.

My first goal was to order the blooming cake. My first thought had been to have my sister, Sapphire, make it. But while you can't beat her baked goods, she wasn't really up on decorating them for show. People came to her muffin shop for the way the muffins tasted and how they made them feel, not for how pretty they were. Trust me on that one.

The Flour Pot was my first choice. In fact, right now, they were my only choice. I was that set on them. They'd expanded their business into catering and, yes, wedding cakes. Their cakes weren't all that extravagant, but they had that pretty fondant icing and came in as many tiers as you were willing to pay for.

I figured a smaller three-tier cake would do just fine. Or maybe even a two-tier cake with the bride and groom topper, and then some fancy cupcakes for the kidlings. I was willing to trust the Flour Pot for guidance on that one.

At least, that had been my plan. But when I showed up at their small little counter in their small little dining room, they turned my order down flat.

"I don't understand. I thought you all did wedding cakes now." I glanced pointedly over at the small decorated wedding cake in the display case.

The owner flushed but shook his head. "We do, but I'm afraid we're totally booked up well into July." He glanced at me sternly. "A month's notice is not nearly enough for a well-crafted wedding cake, you know. We don't knock those out in a day. And June is a very popular month for weddings." He tusked. "Everyone wants that perfect June wedding. Like May or July isn't just as good."

I forced my brain away from the fact that an October wedding would have been no issue at all with the cake. Unfortunately, that did me no good now that June 5th was all but written in stone. I'd just have to go somewhere else.

"Can you recommend another place?"

He just looked at me, with one eyebrow flying high. "Weren't you listening? If you want a well-crafted wedding cake, you need to give more than a few weeks' notice. Good luck finding a place that can fit you in this late."

I was more than a little deflated when I left the shop. So deflated, in fact, that I had decided to drown my troubles in Raspberry Delight donuts and coffee. And I even bought some to share with my man and his entire office.

My motives for sharing were purely altruistic, too. It wasn't that I wanted to make a point to Trixie that I was here to stay.

Nope. Not my intention at all. And I'd keep telling myself that too.

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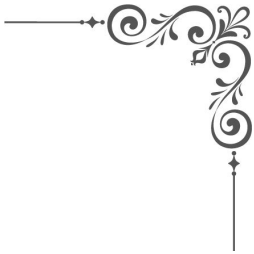

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Chapter 2

Orville didn't seem too surprised by my impromptu visit. But then he didn't seem too bothered by it, either. Of course, there were Flour Pot donuts involved. How could he possibly be upset about that?

After dropping them off, and making sure to say a bright hello to the redheaded Trixie on my way out, I headed for the shop. I know it seems kind of backward for a shop owner to admit, but I was really hoping for a slow morning.

I wouldn't be able to rest easy until I had this cake issue in hand. The warning I'd gotten from the Flour Pot's owner had me more than a little concerned.

It was really odd, this whole getting emotional about a wedding thing. I'd have never thought in a million years that I'd be like this. All caught up in making it a perfect day. Shoot, in the past, I'd kind of looked down on all those frantic brides.

Of course, that was back in the day I never pictured myself as one. A bride, that is. Marriage just didn't seem to be in the cards for me. Orville had changed all that.

And now I got the frantic bride thing. I had one month to bring together a once in a lifetime day. The pressure was staggering.

The first thing I did was make a list. Mainly so that I could have the pleasure of crossing an item off it. The preacher part of the affair was being handled by Orville. Good as done, according to him. One item down.

No sooner had I crossed the item off and pulled over the phone book to start looking for bakeries than the shop's bell rang out. Well, that hadn't lasted long.

Customers came in and out of the shop all morning. I was still doing a brisk pace when Kimberly and the kids came in at noon.

The saint of a woman handed me a bag of Chinese takeout and took over the front counter. The older kids headed upstairs to their home away from home, fully stocked with chairs, a television, and games and toys galore.

Baby Pearl came into the back with me. I needed her calming presence. Now more than ever.

Too bad that wasn't what I got.

No. What I got was a fussy and very irritated baby. After changing

her diaper, which was barely even wet, and giving her a bottle, the fussing continued. Another five minutes and I was ducking back into the front of the shop.

"You have any idea what's up with baby Pearl? I can't seem to make her happy."

Kimberly looked at me and sighed. "She's teething. Nothing makes her happy right now." She hesitated. "I can take her up here with me if you want."

I glanced around the busy shop. An irritated baby would not be good for business at all. And if word got out about it, it could mean a serious downturn in our customer base. Not worth it in the long run.

"That's okay. If I can't get her settled down, I'll enlist Nancy to take her upstairs with them."

Kimberly nodded. "That would be great." She paused to cash out a customer, then looked back to me. "I picked up a couple of teething rings from the store on the way in. They're in her bag. But they work better cold."

"I'll give her one now to try and put the other in the freezer for a bit." With a plan in mind, I turned toward the dividing curtain again.

"Make sure you wash them first."

I glanced over my shoulder and gave her one of my looks. The girl didn't get them often, but she knew it for what it was.

"Sorry," she said smiling at me. "Forgot who I was talking to there for a minute."

I gave her a curt nod and ducked into the back. The teething ring helped, at least for a short bit. I'd take what I could get. When Nancy and Mason came downstairs an hour later, I still hadn't had a chance to make my first call.

However, I did have a whole list of places to try. I was taking to heart the advice that this might not be a simple matter of calling one or two to do a price match. At this point, I'd dig into my savings if I had to. I just wanted a nice, professionally decorated two-tier bloody cake with a stupid bride and groom doll at the top. How hard could that possibly be to do?

Before the kids made it to the back door to start their ritual morning walk, I stopped them. I'd recently purchased an old-fashioned baby carriage for the shop, and I'd seen the covert glances Nancy had thrown at the thing. I kind of figured she wanted it for one of her dolls, but the item was far too expensive to be used as a mere toy.

Now, however, that could totally work in my favor. Funny how I'd never even thought of actually using it for baby Pearl. Time to remedy that.

"Nancy, why don't you go in and nab that baby carriage and take baby Pearl along for your walk?"

Her eyes didn't light up like I thought they would. Instead, she cast a somewhat wary glance down at baby Pearl. When she saw the baby gnawing on the teething ring, she gave a slow nod. "I guess we could do that."

Within minutes, the kids were out the door, and the shop was peaceful again. At least the back part of it. If I'd been a better friend and boss, I probably would have gone up to help Kimberly with the sudden bang-up day we were having. But first things first. I had some calls to make.

A DOZEN CALLS LATER and I still had no cake on order. I was desperate enough to pull up a search on the internet for home-made wedding cakes. In a pinch, they would have to do. I did like the little ornate tower of cupcakes. My only question was, where would the tiny bride and groom dolls go? I really wanted them on top of an actual cake, dang it.

I wasn't quite ready to give up on that want yet, either. Maybe with a good month's notice, Sapphire could learn the whole fondant thing? In fact, she might even consider it a fun challenge. After all, we were very different witches to have come from the same mother.

The kitchen definitely wasn't my domain, but Sapphire was most at home there. You could tell with the quality of the food we made too. Even if the cake wouldn't be as gorgeous as I wanted it to be, I knew that a cake crafted by her would be delicious none the less.

It was a failsafe plan. My wedding cake Plan B.

Having a backup plan did help my nerves a bit. I'd been beginning to think my wedding day was doomed right from the get-go.

It wasn't a feeling I liked. But if a home-made cake was the least of my problems, then I could deal with that. Only if I absolutely had to, mind you, but I could.

Since I had my computer all booted up, I used it to do a quick search of what I would need for a proper wedding day. That was the totally wrong thing to do. I almost hyperventilated when I saw the length of the lists that came up.

That wouldn't do at all.

Then I reminded myself that Orville and I were simple folk. We wouldn't need archways covered in rosebuds or ushers or a ton of other things on their lists. My original list, after boiling it down to the bare minimum, only had six things on it. A cake, a wedding dress (I was counting on Orville to handle his own tuxedo), invitations, food, a preacher, and choosing the maid of honor and best man.

Most of those items I already had in hand. Orville had taken care of the preacher, which could have been a big issue. I was hoping to

use my mother's wedding gown, which I knew was in a sealed bag in Sapphire's enormous attic. Sapphire and I could handle the food. And the maid of honor and best man were no-brainers. Sapphire for me, and Opie for Orville.

That only left the cake, which I had a back-up plan for, and the wedding invitations. I'll admit, I was breathing a bit easier after that.

I could do this. Shoot. I could probably even help Sapphire with the cake. How hard could it be?

This wedding planning thing wasn't nearly as difficult as I'd thought it would be.

At least, it wasn't until my phone rang.

It was Orville.

I said my normal quick prayer to the Goddess before answering. Life wasn't so easy when the man you loved was in law enforcement. Not in this day and age.

"Hey, Opal."

The short and terse greeting told me something was up. This wasn't just a check in call. My heartbeat picked up a notch.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

A short pause. "I'm okay."

Another pause. I was getting more worried by the second. "Where are you? I'm coming."

"No. Don't do that." Okay, those words were quick enough. "I just know how stressed out you are right now, and I hate to add to your burden."

My burden? What the.... Oh. "Let me guess. Reverend Castle will not be officiating at our wedding, will he?"

"He will not."

"I hope he has a darn good reason for backing out on you. Did your deputies convince him he would be doing the town a disservice or what?" Of course, it was entirely possible the man had been having second thoughts about performing a ceremony for a known witch. Either way, I wanted to know.

"It's not like that, Opal."

"Then maybe you should tell me what it is like, Orville."

"I'm working myself up to it, okay. It's just... well, I'm afraid you're not going to take this well."

"If you don't tell me right this instant, Orville Taylor, there'll be no more fried chicken in your diet for a year."

Even over the phone, I could hear him suck in a deep breath. "He's dead, Opal. Reverend Castle is dead."

I was kind of glad he'd told me over the phone. That way, he didn't see my slight stagger as I backed up to the chair and sat down heavily. This was so not good.

“Opal? You still there?”

“I’m here.” Now the pause was on my end. “What happened?”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure what I wanted him to say at that point. If it was natural causes, then it was entirely possible the universe was trying to tell us something. Oh, who was I kidding? The universe was speaking, all right. Loud and clear. Regardless of how the man died.

“He was murdered.” Orville’s voice was rocky. He was taking the man’s death hard. I could understand that. He’d been an upstanding member of Reverend Castle’s church for over a decade. Orville had bonded with the man. “Right there in the church too.”

“Are you there now? I’ll come to you.”

“No! I mean, that wouldn’t be a good idea right now, Opal. Not a good idea at all. Not with how things are at the office. You need to step back from this one. We aren’t partners yet.” He hesitated. “At least not in detecting. You get that distinction, right?”

Oh, I got it all right. But that didn’t mean I had to be happy about it.

The voices in the background grew louder. “Sorry, Opal, I have to go. I’ll see you tonight at the farmhouse, but it may be later than usual.”

“I’ll keep a plate warm for you.”

“Fried chicken and mashed potatoes would sure make this day a little better. Just saying.”

He hung up before I could answer him. Fried chicken it was.

There was a very good reason why Orville hadn’t wanted to tell me the news. We witches take things like omens very seriously. It’s in our blood. And right now, this looked like a mighty powerful omen that someone, or something, didn’t want the two of us getting married.

First, the wedding cake issue and now the good reverend murdered? I really hoped this wasn’t a bad sign of even worse things to come.

Of course, things couldn’t get much worse for poor Reverend Castle.

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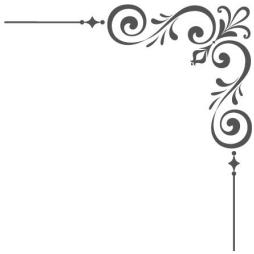

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Chapter 3

I left the shop a bit early to give myself time for a market run. My man needed his fried chicken tonight, dang it, and I didn't have a single chicken breast in the fridge. It had been a while since I'd done a full-on grocery run, so I made the most of it. Thank the Goddess that Nancy volunteered to go with me.

We took baby Pearl with us too. Mason and Kimberly stayed behind to close up the shop. The boy needed a little alone time with his mom. Plus, he was a darn good little worker too.

Nancy and I, with baby Pearl all cuddled into her car seat in Nancy's cart, walked the aisles collecting everything we could think of that we needed. I'd planned on making this run over the weekend, so I didn't have my list handy.

And, to top it off, both of us were on the snacky side. All that to say that my cart was overflowing by the time we checked out. A couple of hundred well-spent dollars later and we were on our way home.

I changed baby Pearl and handed her off to Nancy to feed. The highchair was right there at the dining room table, so they were close enough if she needed help. Bottles were still a thing, yes, but now solid food was a thing too.

Tonight was a fruit and cereal kind of night. I didn't figure baby Pearl would give Nancy too much trouble with that. She loved those. If it had been a peas or carrots night, Nancy might not have been so willing. Those nights were rather... messy, to say the least.

Working as a team, we managed to get supper on the table and still have a fed and satisfied baby by the time Kimberly and Mason made it home.

Good thing, too, as Orville arrived soon after.

"I thought you were working late?"

He took a deep breath. "I cut out. I've done what I could for today. My team is continuing to work on it, but right now things are kind of pending the crime scene analysis. I'm kind of hoping I missed something that they'll find, and we can make short work of this."

I just looked at him. "Have they ever, in your history of being sheriff, found something that you missed?"

Orville scrubbed his chin. "Well, there's always a first time, isn't

there?"

Still, it wasn't like Orville to leave the crime scene before his team finished their work. I frowned at him. "So why aren't you still there?"

His eyes met mine. "Believe it or not, I needed a break." He hesitated. "Plus, I kind of wanted to talk with you about all this. See how you were holding up."

That made me stop everything and stare at him. "And what do I have to do with the investigation? You've already warned me not to get involved."

He nodded. "And I still think that's for the best." Another hesitation. He glanced over his shoulder, but the two of us were alone. Well, besides baby Pearl in her swing, ever watchful. The others had gone upstairs to wash up for dinner. "I'm more worried about how you're handling the news of the reverend's death. I don't want you reading too much into it and changing your mind about getting married. I've waited too long for this to let that happen."

I folded my arms against my chest and arched an eyebrow at him. "And why on earth would I cancel our wedding because some miscreant murdered a preacher?" Then my eyes bore into his. "Unless you're telling me that you think the two things are related?"

Another chin scrubbing. "And if I thought, just maybe mind you, that they might be?"

I thought about it. He deserved an honest answer. "I'm guessing that you think just a single person killed him? We aren't talking about a whole town gathered with pitchforks and flaming torches, right?"

He smiled at me. "Just one person as far as we know."

"Well, then I think our wedding is safe."

Orville blew out a breath. "Good. I was that worried. You witches read so much into everything."

"And for good reason." I stood on tippy-toe to give him a quick kiss. "But that doesn't mean that we let others sway us from our set path in life, now does it?"

His smile turned into a flat-out grin. "I pity the man who would dare such an atrocity."

"Well then, there you have it. We'll figure out who killed Reverend Castle, and if it did have anything to do with our upcoming ceremony, then we'll know. But until then, I'm going to think the two are totally unrelated."

I meant that too. I had enough to worry about without adding more to it.

He nodded. "Sounds good." Then a second later, "Wait a minute... we? I thought you were staying out of this one?"

I just smiled at him and called up the stairs. "Come and get it, everyone."

The others settled down around the table, but Orville and I took our plates to go. It wasn't that we were trying to be anti-social or anything, but I had fully meant that 'we'. And I didn't figure talking about death and murder was a great idea at a family dinner that included children.

We ended up in the meditation gazebo. I loved it there.

"Should I start a fire?" Orville asked. "It's just a touch nippy out here."

"That would be lovely." The truth was, the fire was all ready to be lit. All it took was a touch of flame to get it going. I could have done it with a flick of the wrist. Orville had to dig for his lighter. Still, starting a fire was generally seen as a man's work. And Orville could be old-fashioned at times. I liked to give him little pick me ups whenever I could.

Once the flames were going nicely, I turned to him. "So, mind telling me what gives you the idea that the good reverend's death and our wedding are related?"

He almost choked on the bite he'd just taken. Like he'd thought I was going to let him off the hook that easily. He was a smart man. He should have realized I hadn't brought him out here just to have him all to myself.

"Well, it isn't that I really think that. I mean, how egotistical would that be?" He gave half a laugh. "It's just, what good reason would anyone have to kill the man? He was a preacher, for gosh' sake. One of God's shepherds. Who would hate him enough to kill him?"

I took a bite and chewed while I thought. "What is it they say, there are only three real motives for murder? The three L's, I think you call it. Love, loathing, or loot?"

"That's just it. I'm kind of having a hard time seeing either of those three as a motive in this one. Reverend Castle was a widower. Lost his wife to cancer a few years back and hasn't remarried. Not even dating, as far as I know, so love shouldn't be an issue. And the man's life work was the church. He went around doing God's work. Who could hate him for that?"

I watched enough television to know that last one was a bit flimsy. There were plenty of people in this world who hated people for doing the right things. One news show could show you that. And how many churches had been burned in the past year? Far too many. Good people were murdered every day. Hate didn't have boundaries.

"And the loot thing?"

Orville shook his head. "Nothing appeared to be taken. He still had his watch and wallet, and the collection box wasn't even touched."

"Any camera footage?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "In the church? No." He took another

bite, and I could tell he was thinking. “I’ll check out the area businesses, though. See if any of them have a camera that might have caught something. We’ll know more if the coroner can narrow down the time of death.”

We sat in silence for a minute or two. Finally, I broke. “You know I’m not in the habit of repeating myself, Orville, but I did ask you a question that I didn’t get an answer to, you know.”

He gave me a lop-sided smile. “Ah, so you caught that, huh?” He took a deep breath. “I know that you told me that people would be upset when they found out we were a couple, but I never really believed it. Oh, maybe one or two witch-haters might have a problem with it, but…”

“But you’re finding out that a lot of people aren’t happy about the two of us being an ‘us’, aren’t you?” I hesitated, not meeting his eyes. “You know, two can back out of a wedding. I was happy with what we had. A ceremony and a piece of official paper will not change how I feel toward you one whit, you know.”

Orville set his plate to one side and turned to me. Then he reached out and cupped my face between his hands. “And that, in a nutshell, is what had me so worried today. All day, when I should have been concentrating on what I was doing, all I could think of was, ‘what is Opal going to think about this?’” He leaned forward until his forehead was resting against mine. “I’m not backing out. Maybe I did have my head in the sand a bit before, but now that my vision is clearer, nothing has changed on my end. If people have issues with us as a couple then that’s their problem. Not ours.”

Then he kissed me. My man’s kisses always had a way of making the world just seem… right. At least for those few precious seconds. And I’ll admit, his words did me good. Now that I’d kind of gotten used to the idea of being married, I really didn’t want to give it up. The ceremony and official paper didn’t matter a bit to me. The everyday closeness it would give us did.

It surprised me to find that it mattered a lot.

Orville had asked me to stay out of the investigation. I hadn’t thought at the time that would be a problem for me.

Now it was.

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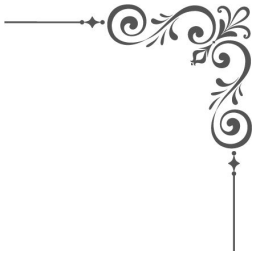

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Chapter 4

Orville left shortly after dinner and a quick round of Dinosaur Chutes and Ladders. The board game thing was kind of a ritual. If he came over to eat, which he was doing more frequently now that we were 'out there', then the meal was usually followed by a quick game between him and the kids while us women folk cleaned up the kitchen.

Technically, the women folk would include Nancy, but we let her off the hook for game time. Besides, three in a kitchen, even for cleaning duties, was a bit much.

The next morning, we got the kids off to school and opened up the shop. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw three people waiting outside for us to unlock the doors. Tourist season rarely started in Wind's Crossing until June. So why was my little shop suddenly so very busy?

It wasn't just gawkers either, they were buyers. Kind of made me wonder what was going on. Was there an event going on that I didn't know about?

I'd planned to cut out about mid-morning to make a trip to the local printer to order our wedding invitations. I didn't want to make the same mistake I'd made with the cake. I was hoping the printing of four dozen embossed white cards with our names and the date and time of the wedding wouldn't be a big deal. Or take long at all. After all, I needed to get the darn things made out and in the mail.

As it was, with the steady flow of customers, I didn't get a chance to go until lunch time. And that was delayed a good half an hour. We even had to lock the door to the shop to stop people coming in. It was that crazy.

Which is just my way of admitting, and explaining, the fact that I might have been more than a little cranky by the time I made it to the printers. I walked in their shop a full fifteen minutes before their posted lunch time, and there wasn't a single person ahead of me in line. Mistakenly, I thought that was one of those good omens we witches liked so much.

I was wrong. Way wrong.

"I'm sorry, but we can't help you."

I glanced around the empty shop. "Are you taking lunch early?"

Not that I saw that as a reason not to wait on a customer who was standing right in front of you. To me, that was more than a little rude.

"No," the woman behind the counter said, standing up to her full height. "I'm saying we won't print your wedding invitations."

I took yet another glance around the shop. Nope, no one had shown up in the past few seconds. It was still just me and her.

"May I ask why not?"

She sneered at me. "I think you know full well why not, but sure, I'll tell you. This town doesn't want you marrying Sheriff Orville Taylor. And we will not be a part of it in any way, shape, or form. Good luck getting anything you need for your wedding here in Wind's Crossing."

That kind of sounded like a threat to me. And I really, really didn't like threats. Not when other people made them, anyway. My threats were more like promises of what could happen should someone not see the error of their ways. Big difference.

I had two choices. I could make a scene—after all, who would see but me and her? — or I could turn around and walk out.

I walked out.

By the time I made it back to the shop, I'd totally forgotten to eat. Not that I thought I could swallow a bite right now. No, between my worry and my anger, I was full enough as it was. Adding food to that mix might not be the wisest of things to do.

As it stood, I had a wedding in less than a month. We had no preacher, which could pose a major problem with the whole me being a witch thing. We had no cake. And now we had no wedding invitations.

The omens just kept piling up.

I was starting to think Sapphire had been the smartest of the two of us by just eloping. No ceremony to worry about then.

Of course, the contrarian in me wouldn't allow the townsfolk to win that easily. We'd have a wedding all right. And it would be a beautiful, loving, friend and family filled day. Or, well, night. I'd see to that personally.

But it just might be time to concede that I needed help.

It was time to bring in my sister.

I LEARNED FROM MY MISTAKES. We locked the door to the shop ten minutes before closing time. The shop was just about as full as it could get, anyway. If this continued, I'd be in for a record-breaking week in sales. And by the middle of the week, too. I didn't sell this much stuff in the height of tourist season, or at Christmas, for that matter. Whatever was up, it was certainly going to be good for my bank

account.

The bad news, though, was that it meant me having to help out in the front of the shop rather than spend a few minutes here and there doing wedding planning stuff. Why did this week have to be the busy one?

The sign on the door clearly said that we closed at four. I sent Kimberly and the kids home then and stayed behind to wait on the stragglers. There were always a few, weren't there?

I'd called Sapphire earlier, in a very tiny break between helping customers—and yes, I made the call from the bathroom if you must know—and arranged to have dinner with her tonight.

For once, she was coming to us. As it happened, Archie was out of town for a few days, and my sister was at loose ends. I perked up at hearing that. Finally, something was going my way.

I'd told Kimberly not to worry about starting supper. It was going to be a Carney's pizza night. Everyone deserved a few of them. I would have invited my man, but he'd warned me last night that he would be tied up with the case for the next few days.

Now that he could concentrate on it again.

I was hoping to get one thing crossed off my list tonight if nothing else. The wedding dress. Mom's dress was safely tucked away in Sapphire's attic, as we'd been sure of the two of us, she'd be the one to use it. Only she hadn't. Which, in my mind, meant it was available for me.

As we munched on pizza, we started talking about the wedding. Namely, all the trouble I was having trying to get the darn thing off the ground.

I must have been showing more concern than I thought I was because I noticed Kimberly and Sapphire giving each other a knowing glance.

"What?" I asked.

"You know we're here to help out, right? We just didn't want to step on your toes, so we were waiting for you to ask. You get persnickety sometimes when people assume you can't do these things all on your own."

I'd have argued, but deep down I knew she was right. Being the eldest meant something to me. Independence was something I valued very highly in my life. But now? I needed help, dang it all. If that meant asking for it, so be it.

"Fine. Then I'm asking. Can you two help me with this thing?"

Sapphire grinned at me. "Absolutely. Oh, I have so many ideas! And I brought along my wedding book, too, just in case."

I stifled a groan. How on earth could I have forgotten about that blasted wedding book? Sapphire had been all about getting married,

even as a teenager. That's when she'd started the book. Pictures of wedding gowns, flower arrangements, you name it, it was in there.

"Orville and I are going with a very simple ceremony. No flowers, other than what the Goddess provides, and family and very close friends only. Not a super big deal, Sapphire. I just need help with a cake, a preacher, and invitations. I think I can handle the rest."

"What about the dress?" From her look, I could tell she knew one of the reasons I'd invited her over.

I looked her straight in the eye. "I was kind of thinking I'd wear Mom's wedding dress."

There was a story behind that dress. It had never actually been worn. Mom never quite got around to getting married. Up until Orville's surprise proposal, I'd kind of thought I'd just be following in her footsteps. Funny that I'd be the one wearing the dress down the aisle.

Then I noticed that Sapphire hadn't said anything. In fact, she was no longer meeting my eyes.

"What?"

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "It's nothing. I'd just had all these visions of me wearing that gown down the aisle. I guess it took this for it to hit me that now I'll never get that chance." Another deep breath and a smile. "But it will be nice watching you do it, all the same. The dress deserves to be worn for the purpose it was made for."

"It does." I glanced at her wedding book. Goddess, but that binder was a thick one. She'd put a lot into that thing over the years.

My guilt ratcheted up a couple of notches too. Not because I was having the wedding that she'd always dreamed of, either. More because it was more than likely that I was the reason she didn't have one, to begin with. The whole reason she'd run off and eloped was because of me and my feelings about Earth witches.

My feelings on that matter, I'll admit, may have been more than a little prejudiced. I'm still working on that, now that we have Earth witches in the family. The fact that their Earth magic had turned out to be useful more than once helped.

It didn't seem right not to put some of that book to good use. But not just for me. I wanted a simple wedding, dang it.

But that didn't mean I couldn't share it, now did it?

I knew I should have run something this big by Orville first, but I knew my man. I'd be dead shocked if he had an issue with what I was about to say.

"You know, Sapphire, you could still have a wedding."

She gave me a small smile. "Isn't that kind of like closing the barn door after the horses get out? I'm already well and truly married,

Opal. No regrets on that, either."

"True. But people renew their vows all the time. And people that run off to Vegas often have a ceremony back home for everyone else. Don't see why you and Archie can't do the same. In fact, how hard would it be to make my wedding a double one? Share the work and share the day?"

She gasped in glee. An actual gasp with actual glee. That was my sister.

"You'd do that for me?"

"Seems only fitting as I'm the reason you didn't have your big day to begin with." Then I hesitated. "But nothing too fancy, okay? Close friends and family, up on the hilltop under the light of the full moon. Would you be okay with that?"

Sapphire threw her arms around me. "More than okay with it! Oh, Opal, thank you. This is wonderful." Then she sat down on the couch and patted the cushion beside her before pulling the huge and heavy book onto her lap. "Now, let's plan our wedding."

And that's just what we did. I kept her restrained, for the most part. But she wasn't budging on the issue of flowers. We both had to have bouquets. Pink and white roses for her, and white daisies for me. Our personal favorites.

And yes, she was also holding out for a flower-covered archway for us to walk under. One side of the arch was to be covered in daisies, the other in roses, with the top a delicate weaving of both. According to her, we had to have one "for the photos, if nothing else".

Which brought up another thing I hadn't thought of. Wedding photography. Not that it was an issue. Sapphire's daughter, Amie, was great behind a camera. And I really couldn't see her telling her mom and me no. Family did for family.

At least one piece of the puzzle fell neatly into place. Unfortunately, with the new double wedding plan, another piece fell out.

I looked at Sapphire. "Now for the big question. Who gets to wear Mom's dress?"

Her face fell as she looked at me. "Oh."

Yeah, 'oh' was right.

By this time, Kimberly and the kids had all gone upstairs, and Sapphire and I had long since moved into my little apartment for our discussions and negotiations. At Sapphire's wish, baby Pearl was spending the night with us.

That's all kind of need to know information for what came next.

Bridget, my macaw familiar, had been sitting on her post, watching our deliberations quietly. Now, she shook her head and spoke. "Divide the dress."

We both just looked at her, then at baby Pearl. We'd thought baby Pearl was fast asleep, but two bright eyes looked out at us from the little travel crib.

Then we looked at each other. "Is she talking like King Solomon and the baby? Whoever loves the dress more will agree to let the other have it?"

Bridget cackled. It sounded a lot like Mom when she got tickled. "You can sew."

Oh. Now I got it. She really meant the whole divide the dress thing.

And you know? It just could work.

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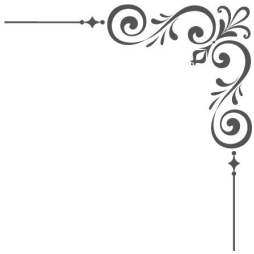

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Chapter 5

With all the negotiations, we were still at it late into the night. With that being the case, plus the added help of Archie being away from home, it wasn't hard for me to talk Sapphire into spending the night. Good thing, too.

Baby Pearl didn't sleep through the night. To be honest, that was still a hit or miss kind of thing. We took what we could get.

But the teething on top of all the wedding talk was just too much for her, it would seem. She didn't wake up just at midnight, either. She was up again at three in the morning. Sapphire took the first round, and I took the second.

It was only fair.

By the time the child woke up the third time ready for the day at six o'clock, I was more than ready to hand her off to Nancy for the ritual first of the morning feeding. The girl was good at helping out like that. She insisted on doing her part... as long as her part didn't involve the southern half of the baby, that is. Nancy had a distinct aversion to diapers.

Not that I blamed her. Changing diapers wasn't high on my list, either.

Normally, after that feeding, Nancy handed her off to Kimberly, and we all started the day with showers, breakfasts, and the general getting ready to go chores.

Not today.

I opened the bathroom door after my shower to find Nancy standing there with wild eyes. She was holding baby Pearl, but I noticed there was a little more distance between the two of them than there normally was.

"What's wrong?"

Nancy swallowed. "I think maybe Pearl is a witch, Mom. Only... well, witches don't get their power until later on, right?"

I arched an eyebrow at her and led her out to my living room. Even after six months, I still hadn't figured out a way to break the news to the rest of the family. Or Kimberly. Kimberly, being Pearl's mother, definitely had the right to know what she was in for. And, of course, that I would have her back all the way.

"What happened?"

She swallowed again, then held baby Pearl out to me. I took the hint and strapped the grinning baby into her bouncy chair. All the better for Nancy and me to have a nice little uninterrupted chat. I really hoped that Mom would stay out of it.

I glanced over at Bridget, but she didn't appear to be paying us much mind. She liked to linger over her breakfast. So far, so good.

"I took her upstairs and got the bottle ready. I know I put the bottle on the table beside the rocking chair. But then I realized I needed a cloth for burp time, so I put Pearl in the playpen and went down to get one."

She stopped, staring hard at baby Pearl.

"And?" I prompted.

"And when I got back, Mason was still sawing logs as I went past his bedroom. You know he doesn't get up easy, right?"

Oh, I knew all right. There was a reason that getting Mason out of bed in the morning was up to Kimberly. That boy loved his morning sleep-ins. Getting up early? Not so much.

At my nod, she continued. "Well, when I went back to our playroom... Pearl was still in the playpen, but she had her bottle." Yet another swallow. "She was drinking it, only, well, she wasn't exactly holding it."

That sounded like Mom's favorite levitation spell, all right. I glanced down at baby Pearl and then up at Nancy. "You're right. She is a witch." I hesitated. "But there's a bit more to it than that. Only, I kind of think maybe I need to tell Kimberly first. She should be the first to know, don't you think?"

Nancy nodded. "No problem. But she really is a witch? I'm not losing my mind?"

I smiled at her. "You aren't losing your mind, child."

"Good." She glanced down at baby Pearl, who now seemed fascinated by her own foot. Just a normal little baby discovering new things every single day. Yeah, not buying it, baby Pearl. You'll have to try harder than that. "Is it okay if I leave her down here with you and just let Kimberly know she's here?"

I bit my lip. "That will be fine, dear. But I hope you don't let this upset you too much, or let it change how you feel about her. She is a witch, yes, but she's also a baby. And a member of the family." Twice over, but she'd find that out later, after my little talk with Kimberly.

She nodded, but I didn't like the uncertainty of her expression. I hoped she'd come out of it soon. It was rather a shock now, but hopefully, the idea would eventually just take root and grow. After all, baby Pearl being a witch could actually draw the two of them closer together. Another young witch in the family.

Once Nancy got used to the idea, she'd be on board. I hoped.

Especially as I was going to need all the help I could get with baby Pearl. I hadn't realized until now just how much I'd been counting on Nancy for that help.

I WAITED UNTIL AFTER we dropped the kids off at school and got the shop properly opened. At least there weren't customers waiting outside this morning. I was kind of hoping that they'd hold off coming for a bit longer too.

Long enough for a nice little heart to heart chat with Kimberly.

We were straightening out the window display, freshening things up a bit, when I finally turned to her. "Kimberly..." and then the words just vanished. Right up in smoke.

She looked at me. "Yes, Opal?"

Desperate for something to talk about now that I had once again chickened out of discussing the real issue that needed to be discussed, I lit on the fact that she was raised in the same neighborhood where Orville lived. It was worth a shot.

"You used to live close to Orville, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes. My stepdad's house was just a couple of blocks over from his. Why?"

I shrugged. "I was wondering if you ever went to Reverend Castle's church. Were you and your family members of that congregation?"

Her lips thinned out. "We were. It was a requirement of my stepdad's. Every Sunday, rain or shine, and in sickness or in health, our bodies had to be sitting in a hard pew to listen to the good reverend spout out his sermon."

The way she said the words 'good reverend' had me thinking that she was talking more than a little sarcastically. "Did you not like Reverend Castle? I mean, I know you and your stepdad had very obvious problems." Namely, that the man was a pervert. "But that doesn't mean the church was bad, does it?"

In fact, a good church should have been a comfort during the times that Kimberly went through with her stepdad. Obviously, that hadn't been the case, though.

"Not by itself, no. But Reverend Castle wasn't the saintly man all the menfolk seem to think he is. We women of the church knew better." She hesitated. "At least us younger women did."

"I think I'm going to need a little more than that, Kimberly. What do you mean, exactly?"

Kimberly shook her head. "He just wasn't a very nice man to the girls. When his wife was still alive, it wasn't so bad. I think she evened him out a bit. Kept him honest, if nothing else. But once she died a few years back, things changed."

I let that sink in. “Well,” I said slowly, “that is a pretty big life change to go through.”

She just looked at me. “It wasn’t grief that changed him. More like someone taking the reins off a wild horse.” She tilted her head and thought for a few seconds. “I rather think that’s how he envisioned himself. A wild and free stallion out to sow some wild oats.”

Crapsnackles. That didn’t sound good. Not for the reverend of a church.

“Are you saying the man took advantage of his position to be with young women?”

Kimberly fidgeted. “I can’t say a definite yes to that because no one was talking. Part of that was Reverend Castle’s saintly reputation. I mean, one or two girls came forward about a year after Mrs. Castle died.” She shuddered. “It wasn’t pretty for them. Everyone rallied behind the good reverend and called it a witch hunt.”

I bristled at the phrase. Witch hunts weren’t good, even when they didn’t involve actual witches. Which, honestly, was most of the time.

“Sorry. But that’s what the good old boy network called it. No one else came forward after that. That isn’t to say the bad behavior stopped, though, is it?”

“I truly wish I’d known about this before now. This kind of thing can’t stand, you know.”

She lifted a shoulder. “Well, it did for a long time.”

That brought up a good point and a whole list of possible murder suspects. “Can you think of anyone who might have wanted the man dead? I mean, I know there are a fair few that wouldn’t like him, being what he was, but hate him enough to kill him?”

Her eyes met mine. “Besides me, you mean?”

I blinked at her twice before I could find the words to respond to that. “Please don’t tell me you were one of the ones that stepped forward.”

“No, I wasn’t his type. Thank God. But when things started going wrong with my stepdad, I went to him. I guess I was hoping that the men were right and that he was a decent shepherd to his flock, other than the randy tendencies. I found out that wasn’t the case.”

“What happened?”

She took a deep breath and looked away, tidying up the display a bit more. Tidying that didn’t need to be done, I might add.

“He acted like he believed me. Made me think he was on my side. Told me he’d take care of it. That it wouldn’t happen again. All the right things.”

I waited. There was more to come, but I didn’t want to push her. Reliving those days couldn’t be easy for her.

“Then, as soon as I left the church, he called my stepdad. Told him

everything I'd said. He wanted to let him know that I was telling stories on him." Her face flushed. Yup, still a whole lot of anger there. Not that I blamed her one bit.

"That's what got me and Mason shoved out into that tiny little camper next to Nancy and her dad." She hesitated. "In hindsight, that's the best thing that could have happened to me. But at the time, trying to keep the lights on and food on the table for Mason, all while being pregnant... well, it didn't feel like it then."

I swallowed. The Goddess worked in mysterious ways. She had used a very broken, but good-hearted man to fix a fair few lives in Wind's Crossing. Not that I believed that violence was the right way to handle the situation. But truthfully, the world was a lot better off without the men he killed in it.

One of those men had been Nancy's dad. That had led to Nancy getting a new lease on life with a mother who loved her. Namely me. But it had also eventually led me to Kimberly and Mason too.

As I said. Mysterious ways.

"I can understand that." I paused. "But you don't seem the murdering type to me. And even if you were, you would have killed the man months ago, not now. Who else had reason to want him dead?"

She shrugged, her concentration apparently totally on the display. I knew better than that. She wasn't meeting my eyes for a reason.

"I trust you, Opal. I do. But I know that anything I say to you will find its way to the sheriff." Kimberly took a deep breath. "And to tell you the truth, Reverend Castle had it coming. Ten times over, in my opinion. If it was one of the girls that stepped forward only to have their lives ruined by the man... well, I'm not so sure I want to be the one that rats them out."

"You don't really think murder is the right way to solve anything, do you?"

"Maybe not the right way, no. But to some, it might seem like the only way. If no one will listen to you, or believe you, what alternatives do you really have?"

Crapsnackles. The girl had a point. But that didn't mean we could just let someone get by with murder. Even if the one they murdered was a blight to the human race.

As Orville once told me, that's how serial killers were born. Once a person has killed, it gets easier for them to kill a second time. And it seems more natural to solve problems that way. To their minds, anyway.

In other words, killing someone changes a person. And always for the worse.

I was seriously hoping that whoever had ended Reverend Castle's

life hadn’t done so with good provocation. I was hoping that the killer was just as bad of a person as the Reverend himself.

That was the only way this was going to end well.

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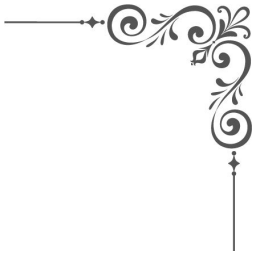

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Chapter 6

If we hadn't so recently had fried chicken, I'd have totally fixed it for Orville. Nothing softened him up like a good, crispy fried chicken breast and drumstick on his plate. If the kids didn't beat him to all the drumsticks first, of course.

But too much fried food wasn't that good on the man's internal workings. Mine either, for that matter. Pot roast, the man's second favorite meal was out, too, because I just didn't have the time to get it done before supper. What did that leave?

The man loved his soup beans. And they had them all ready-made at the market too. All I'd have to do would be heat up a jar of beans and top them off with some good, old-fashioned cornbread. That wouldn't take long at all.

Good thing, too, as our brief respite with shop customers came to an end just after our short conversation. I'd truly like to know who switched on the button for my shop's sudden popularity. People just didn't stop coming. Maybe the tourist season was just starting early this year?

Eventually, it would level out. In the meantime, I'd need to be thinking about giving Kimberly some kind of bonus. Should be doing that anyway. Maybe a profit-sharing type deal? Seemed only fair to me.

We managed to get the shop closed up by fifteen after four. It took some doing, and we had to hurry a few customers on their buying process, but we did it.

While Kimberly took baby Pearl and Mason home, Nancy and I hit the market.

"Did you get a chance to tell Kim about Pearl?" She asked the question as soon as the two of us were alone in the car. The shop wasn't all that safe for private conversations like this one.

I felt my face heat up a touch. "No. I started to, but then we got off of on other things." The truth, that, even if I had been the one to get us off onto them. "I'll try again tonight."

Nancy nodded. "I think maybe you need to tell her soon, Mom. I kind of wondered about some things before, but now that I know... well, I think Pearl's magic is getting stronger every day."

She wasn't wrong.

We were almost to the market on the edge of town when Nancy turned to me again. “Do most witches get their magic that young? Was I a late bloomer or something? Or is it an elemental thing?”

I threw her a quick glance before taking my eyes back to the road. I pulled into the market’s lot before turning to her. “You aren’t a late bloomer. Quite the opposite, actually. Most witches don’t show a spot of magic until they hit their teens. I’ve seen the magic in you. It’s strong. Don’t know yet if you’re an elemental, because I really think you’re still too young to open the flood gates to your power. You understand that, right?”

She nodded slowly. “I guess so. But Pearl isn’t even a year old, and she doesn’t have a generational elemental bloodline. Not that I know of anyway. Do things like that sometimes skip a generation? Could her grandmother have been a witch?”

I hesitated. So far, only Sapphire and I knew the true story of baby Pearl’s soul. I’d kind of hoped to make Kimberly be the third in on the secret. As baby Pearl’s mother, it only seemed right. But I might be needing Nancy’s help with handling baby Pearl.

Who was I kidding? I’d need a lot of Nancy’s help with baby Pearl. I’d need a lot of help with her, period.

I took a deep breath. “You up for a secret?”

Her eyes widened. “As in a Ravenswind, give your word and never tell, secret?”

“Yup.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I give you my word as a Ravenswind that I won’t share what you are about to tell me with anyone.”

“That’ll do.” And then I told her. Everything. Well, a shortened version of everything. But in the end, her eyes were wider than I’d ever seen them. “Pearl is really THAT Pearl? For real?”

I nodded.

Nancy looked out the window and then back at me. “Do Ruby and Amie know?”

“Nope. Not yet. I was actually planning on telling Kimberly first. She has even more of a right to know than the rest of the family does. She’s the one the Goddess entrusted to give birth to baby Pearl. That says a whole heck of a lot there.”

Nancy drew in a long breath and then gave a big swallow. “Ruby’s told me some stories about her grandmother.” Her ever so wide eyes met mine. “Mom, I think you need to tell Kimberly really, really soon.”

I just wished that wasn’t easier said than done.

It was enough to make me almost skip the market and just go with something I had at home. But that wouldn’t do. I needed to have a long talk with Kimberly, yes, but I had to have a long talk with Orville

first.

And for that talk to go over as well as I hoped it would, I needed to fix a good, comfort food dinner. For tonight, that meant soup beans.

We ran in and out of the market in under five minutes. Then we headed home.

I had half decided to put the chat with Kimberly at the head of the line, but I never got the chance. When we made it home, it was to find a note on the door.

"Don't worry about us tonight, Opal. Gray called, and we're going up to grill out at his trailer. Tell Nancy I'm sorry. I'll make sure she comes next time."

I looked down at Nancy. "Sorry you missed out, kiddo."

She grinned up at me. "I'm more than okay with it, actually. Gray is cool and all, but a nice, quiet evening with my room all to myself? I'll take it." She hesitated and made a face. "Besides, I think things are going to be kind of awkward around her for a little while."

Yeah, I was afraid of that too.

Nancy opted for leftovers rather than share our delightful dinner of soup beans and cornbread. The girl didn't know what she was missing.

But by the time Orville showed up, looking dead tired by the way, we had the entire downstairs all to ourselves. Nancy had already eaten and was hibernating in the unnatural state of quiet up in her rooms.

"Where is everyone?"

"Off doing their own thing."

"Gray?"

I nodded. "Gray." A slow smile started up on his face. "Now before you go getting frisky, I should tell you that Nancy is upstairs. Not that we're likely to see her, but still."

The smile hesitated. He glanced up the stairs. Then he stepped over to me and swept me into his arms, dipping me for an elaborate, movie-style kiss.

When I finally came up for air, I was laughing. "You seem awfully energetic for a man that just had a hard day."

He winked at me. "Oh, I'm tired, but I'm starting to really like this coming home to you, Opal. Can't wait until it's every single night."

Neither could I.

Then he sniffed the air. "Is that…"

"Yup. Fresh cornbread and soup beans. Although, fair warning, the soup beans are ready-made from a jar. Not the same, I know, but I was in a time crunch."

"You won't catch me complaining."

We sat down to eat, and I let him get a couple of bites in before I broached our first subject for the night. I probably should have started with what I'd learned about Reverend Castle, but for me, that wasn't

the most important topic for the evening.

"How would you feel about a double wedding?"

Orville almost choked on a bite of beans. He took his time getting a drink and getting the coughing under control. I waited.

"Kim and Gray?"

I leaned back. That thought had never crossed my mind. It was way too early in their relationship for them to be talking marriage. Wasn't it?

"No. Actually, I was thinking Sapphire and Archimedes."

He tilted his head at me. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't they already married?"

"They are. But they eloped. No wedding. And when I recruited Sapphire to help with the wedding, I could see that she really regretted that. So I…"

"Offered to let them renew their vows with us." He took a deep breath and arched an eyebrow at me. "Why am I thinking that this is kind of a done deal already?"

"Nope. You and Archimedes both have veto rights. It would be your wedding too."

Orville grinned at me. "No veto here. I think it's a great idea. Plus, it would give you some help planning the wedding." He took another slow bite. "Don't suppose either of them would know a preacher willing to do the ceremony?"

"I can ask." But the truth was, we Wiccans didn't really associate with many of the Lord's shepherds. Not from any prejudice on our side of things, I might add. But I knew that wasn't really what he was asking. He was asking if I would add that to our list of things to do. "Are you dead set on an actual reverend?"

He leaned back in his chair and thought for a minute. "You know, now that you ask, I'd have to say no. It would be different if I was holding out for a big church wedding, but I'm not. I just want to get married. Church, hilltop, preacher, or Justice of the Peace, it really makes no never mind to me."

I smiled at him. "In that case, I think I can handle getting someone for the ceremony."

Orville blew out a breath. "That would be great. I was starting to sweat it."

Yeah, tell me about it. "You know, with all this going on, well, just know that Halloween is still an option."

"No. It isn't."

So be it. Then I took in a couple of deep breaths. Now for the hard part. Orville had seemed to like Reverend Castle, and so many people had a problem with the whole talking ill of the dead thing. I was hoping, being in law enforcement and everything, Orville wouldn't be

one of them.

"I have some news about Reverend Castle."

He just looked at me over the table. "That's funny. So do I."

"What's your news?"

Orville shook his head. "Nope. You started. You first."

"Well, he might not have been the man you thought he was. From what I heard today, he wasn't all that shy around the ladies and a fair few people had serious issues with the way he handled their affairs. He wasn't all that discreet with their confessions and pleas for help."

He was quiet for a minute. Too quiet.

"Orville?"

Finally, he raised his eyes to meet mine across the table. "I thought you weren't going to get involved in the investigation, Opal."

Our gazes locked for a full minute, neither of us saying a word. An old-fashioned stare down. He knew as well as I did that I hadn't given my word on that. Yes, he'd asked, but I hadn't totally agreed to follow his direction, now had I?

Besides, I hadn't 'gotten involved' as he put it. All I'd done was have a quiet conversation with Kimberly in the privacy of my own shop. If he had a problem with that, then that was his problem. Not mine.

He blinked first, breaking the lockdown. Huh. What do you know, I still had it. Not that I'd doubted that, mind you. Not much, anyway. After all, it was Orville we were talking about here. He was more than a match for me, any day of the week.

"First of all, I don't recall agreeing to that request," I said slowly. "But second of all, I thought it was more to do with keeping away from the station and the official investigation. In that, I respected your wishes. All I did was talk to Kimberly." Another, much shorter, gaze lock. "She went to your church if you recall."

Orville swallowed, his cheeks turning a touch red. "Sorry. I guess I'm more on edge about this whole thing than I thought. I just don't want to give the dissidents at the station any reason to have an issue with how I'm handling this case."

My eyebrow raised on its own. "Is it getting that bad?"

He didn't answer me. Which was answer enough for me. It was.

We took another few bites. "So, what was your news about the Reverend?"

"Pretty much the same as yours." He grimaced. "The things you learn about a person when they're no longer on the earth."

"I hope you got luckier than I did with getting names. Kimberly was pretty tight-mouthed about the whole thing." I took another bite, watching him. "You should know she had major issues with the reverend herself. A good reason for them too."

Orville sighed. “That’s part of the problem I’m having right now. All the people who had a problem with him… and there are a fair few as you said… had a good reason for it. The man wasn’t the shepherd he should have been.”

No argument from me.

“Anybody coming up on that list of suspects worth noting?”

“I wish I could say different, but no. A lot of them aren’t all that sad that Reverend Castle met his maker. But I can’t see any of them as killers either. Most of their grievances went back years. Why revenge them now of all times?”

“So, this revelation puts you no closer to putting an end to this thing, does it?”

He shook his head. “All it really does is muddy the waters. Makes it harder to see the true culprit.” Orville scrubbed his chin. “And I want to put this to rest before the wedding.”

Now that we agreed on.

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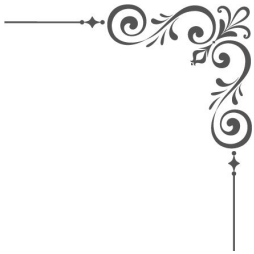

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Chapter 7

Nancy and I got to share the farmhouse just between the two of us all night long, as Kimberly called to tell us that she and the kids were staying over for a camp-out at Gray's. They invited Nancy up to join them, but she declined.

There was something to be said about having the farmhouse all to ourselves. I thought about inviting Sapphire over for more wedding planning, but in the end, I decided against it.

The night was better spent one on one with my newest daughter. Good bonding time.

Saturday morning still meant being up at six, though. I'd gone down to half days open at the shop on Saturdays, and Kimberly and I had taken to trading off weekends too. This weekend was mine. Lucky for me, Nancy was a good little helper.

I went to lock the front door to stop the influx of people ten minutes before close. Sue me, but I was really tired of people busting through the door at five till closing and then expecting us to stay open for an hour or more while they browsed and haggled over items. I was over that. In fact, this whole having a shop thing was growing a bit old. Something I might change once Orville was no longer sheriff and our partnership truly began.

I'd have other things to keep me busy then.

As I stepped back away from the door, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find Sapphire grinning at me.

"Hey, Opal! Wow, the shop's really busy today."

I nodded, then had to immediately go to help someone with a question. Sapphire would have to wait a few more minutes.

Once we had the last customer out the door... and yes, I was a little more aggressive with the pushing today... I turned back to her.

"I thought Archie was coming home today?"

"He is, but his plane got delayed because of some kind of freak storm." She bounced on her heels. "But I did get to talk with him. He's a go for the idea of the double wedding. Isn't that great?" Then her bouncing stopped. "You have asked Orville about it, right?"

I smiled at her. So much enthusiasm. My sister never did anything halfway.

"I did, and he's a go too. Looks like we'll be walking down that

aisle together, sis." To my mind, that beat having a father walk us down the aisle any day. Not that we'd ever really known our father. Yet another secret Mom had kept from us.

Not that I could say much, as I still hadn't shared that kind of information with my own daughter yet. It says a lot that she's never asked too.

"So did you come all this way just to tell me that?" I asked.

"Nope. I came to collect you to come back with me. I've been working on the list, and I've made an appointment with a printer in Oak Hill for this afternoon." She glanced at her watch. "We'll just make it if we leave now."

I glanced back at Nancy. "Do you want to come? Or do you want us to drop you off at the farmhouse first?"

She chewed her lip for a second. "If you'll be back before five, could I maybe hang out at the library? I need some more books, and there are a couple of things I'd like to do some research on."

Nancy was acting a little odd, but no matter. I trusted her. And besides, what harm could come to her at the library? Especially as it was Mabel Morgan behind the desk today.

We dropped Nancy off with Mabel. Sapphire assured me we would be back well before five to pick her up. If not, that wasn't anything a call to Orville or Kimberly wouldn't take care of.

It didn't take me long to see that Sapphire had more planned for the day than just dealing with a printer order for wedding invitations. "So spill, already. What's the game plan for today?"

She gave me a grin. "You always could read me, Opal. But I think you're gonna like this one. Once we're done at the printer, you and I are going to make a wedding cake. A small sample one, but we have to start somewhere, right?"

I chewed my cheek. Didn't sound all that appealing to me. Kitchen duties were a Sapphire kind of thing. "You really want my help with that?" I mean, she knew me.

She laughed. "As a matter of fact, no. But I would like the company and cheerleading squad if you don't have other pressing plans."

And her tone asked the question, even if her words didn't. What could possibly be more pressing than getting the upcoming wedding in order?

"Did you have time to dig out Mom's dress?" I'd agree with the whole cake thing, not that I had a choice, but having something else to preoccupy my mind during the ordeal wouldn't be a bad thing.

"It's in the trunk."

She looked at me for longer than I was comfortable with, seeing as how she was the one behind the wheel. I pointed to the road, and her

gaze returned to where it should be, making more than a minor correction in the car's direction when she did so. That had been a close one. Sapphire wasn't known for her safe driving skills.

I was just getting ready to suggest that she pull over and let me drive when she continued on. "I think Mom's right about the dividing thing. I really think it will work out well. Right now, the dress is kind of overpowering with all the beadwork and embroidery. But if one of us takes the top part, and one takes the bottom part, I think we can make it work."

It had been years since I'd seen the dress. Decades really. But Sapphire's words conjured up an image in my mind. "Yes. I think that will work nicely. I'll need to make a trip to the fabric store in Oak Hill, though." Then as she opened her mouth, "Not today! I think crossing two items off the list is enough for any day."

She deflated a bit but nodded. "I just can't believe that I'm actually going to get to walk down an actual aisle." Another, much quicker, glance over at me. "I owe you for this, Opal."

"No, you don't. Even stevens. That's us."

When she reached Set in Paper, which I assumed was our destination, she turned to me. "I should probably also tell you that Archie has insisted upon paying for the wedding. All of it. So this is on me. Don't go cheap, Opal. We only get to do this once, so let's do it up right."

"I'm not exactly broke, you know." Neither was she, for that matter. Mom had taken care of that with the estate and life insurance benefits she had left behind.

"I wasn't implying that you were. I'm just saying that you can be a bit... frugal, I guess is the word I'm searching for. Yes, frugal is definitely the word. This isn't the time for that. And I thought it might help if you knew that the money would be coming out of an Earth witch's bank account. Ease the pain of overspending a bit."

Ah. She had a point. The thought of spending Archie's money wasn't a bad one at that.

And the printer definitely tried to help us along with that aim. They wanted two separate orders, but I put my foot down. Why on earth would we pay for separate invitations to the same bloody wedding? It wasn't a money thing, but a waste thing. Besides, most of our invitations would be going to the same people, anyway.

If I'd thought Sapphire would argue the point, I'd have been wrong. She was with me on that one. We spent a good hour looking through catalogs and comparing designs before we finally hit on the one for us.

Simple white cards with an embossed moon shining over trees. Absolutely perfect. And the calligraphy style of the lettering was

simple to read, but gorgeous all the same. We had our cards. Several hundred dollars later, an outrageous amount of money for paper and ink in my opinion, and we were on our way again.

"Do we need to go somewhere to pick up the stuff for the cake?"

"Nope. It's all in the back in a cooler. I already made the cake. We're just going to be trying our hand at fondant." Some of her enthusiasm faded just a touch. "I've never worked with it before, I'm afraid. The instructions are rather, well, intimidating."

"If anyone can handle it, you can, sis." I meant it too. "But if all else fails, I was kind of thinking we could do one of those tiered cupcake tree things. The kids would love that, and it would make the whole cutting the cake thing easier too."

She just looked at me. "You do know that particular moment is a key photo opportunity for a wedding, don't you? I want a cake. Not lots of little uncuttable cakes."

If that was the case, then I really, really hoped the whole working with fondant wasn't as complicated as everyone seemed to think it was.

SPOILER ALERT. EVERYONE was right. Fondant is a nightmare. Sapphire was close to tears, and the cake we'd spent a couple of hours on was in the trash can.

According to Sapphire, it was too ugly to eat.

"What are we going to do, Opal? I really do want a cake." She sank down onto my sofa. "Maybe the elopement wasn't such a bad idea after all."

I sat beside her and patted her hand. "This is kind of all my fault, actually. I was holding out for a wedding under the full moon, and Orville wasn't willing to wait until All Hallows Eve."

She frowned at me, but at least she went from looking sad and worried to confused. To me, that was an improvement.

"There are full moons between June and October, you know."

I nodded. "There are. But none that happens to fall on the weekend. With the late-night wedding, Orville thought a weekend wedding was the only way to be considerate to our guests. A lot of them have day jobs."

"Not that it matters," she said, going back to sad and worried. "The date is set in paper now that we've ordered the invitations." She threw an angry glance toward the kitchen. "Darn fondant anyway."

No argument here. Darn it, indeed.

"You know," I said slowly, trying to think out how Sapphire would handle my words before I actually said them. I could tell she was on the edge of a lot of emotions right now as her dream wedding

appeared to be going down in flames. “There are lots of beautiful cakes that don’t have an ounce of fondant on them. I bet we could search on the internet and come up with an alternative that’s every bit as beautiful.”

She looked at me doubtfully. “You really think so?”

“Only one way to find out.” I retrieved my laptop, and we spent the rest of the afternoon surfing the wild, wild web for non-fondant wedding cakes. There were more than a few. Looked like we weren’t the only ones that had an issue with fondant.

Sapphire pointed at one of the sites we’d bookmarked. “You know, I think that could work.”

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. Thank the Goddess. One problem looked to be solved.

“Now the only question is, do we go with one cake or two?”

Hm. I hadn’t thought about that. I did kind of want the little bride and groom topper as a keepsake. I was betting that Sapphire would too.

“One cake would do.” I hesitated. “But it would be great if we could find a way to have two toppers on it.”

She chewed on her lip for a few seconds, then nodded. “I think I can do that. Let me experiment a bit with it.” Sapphire brightened. “If this goes well, I could add wedding cakes to my Good Morning Muffins. That could be fun!”

I smiled at her. “Careful, sis, you might be up for more traffic than you could handle as a sole operator if you expand too much.”

“Then I’d just have to hire someone, wouldn’t I?”

We were still pouring over cake photos when I heard the car in the drive. About time Kimberly and Mason made it home.

Of course, that thought only lasted until I heard the knock on the front door. Kimberly wouldn’t be knocking. She’d just be walking in.

I opened the door to find Orville standing there, a bouquet of daisies in his hand, and trying unsuccessfully to hide a somewhat worried expression on his face.

“What’s happened?”

He bent down and gave me a quick kiss. “That depends on the answers to a few questions I have for you.”

Orville looked over my shoulder at Sapphire and nodded to her. “Afternoon, Sapphire.”

She nodded back. “Orville.”

“Mind telling me how me answering questions is going to change something that’s already happened?”

His face twisted. “Okay, so it won’t exactly change anything, but I’d still like to hear them before I tell you. The whole thing might be nothing.”

I stepped back to let him in, then folded my arms across my chest and waited.

"I was wondering if you'd had a chance to order the wedding invitations? And if the answer to that is yes, where you ordered them from?"

My brows furrowed as I glanced back at Sapphire. This didn't sound promising. "Tell me you didn't order them yourself."

"I did not." He opened his mouth and then shut it. He was apparently holding out until I actually answered his questions. Fair enough.

"Yes. The invitations are on order. Sapphire and I took care of it today. Why? Are you rethinking a Halloween wedding? If so, we can always order more."

He shook his head. "No, it isn't that." He glanced at Sapphire, then back at me. "Where did you order them from?"

Orville's composure was slipping a bit, and that had me more than a little worried. Usually, my man was a rock.

"Set in Paper in Oak Hill. Now, do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

He closed his eyes and swallowed. When he opened them again, he took my elbow and led me over to the sofa, collecting Sapphire along the way.

"I think the two of you need to be sitting for this."

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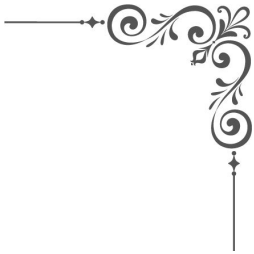

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Chapter 8

"First of all, I want you to promise not to freak out."

Orville was looking straight into my eyes when he said it too. Of the two of us sisters, I was by far the less emotional. That kind of had me worried. Rightly so.

I arched an eyebrow at him but said nothing. What was there to say?

He took a deep breath. "Set in Paper no longer exists."

I looked over at Sapphire. "Of course, it exists. We were there just a few hours ago."

"Then it did." He paused, his eyes still on me. "There was a gas leak in the back of their store and the whole thing went up like a bonfire on speed." Another deep breath. "The building is pretty much gone. As far as I know, they're still working on containing the damage now."

And his first instinct upon hearing the news had been to rush over here and tell me. That made me think only one thing. He had considered the fact that the fire might have to do with our wedding.

I wanted more information on the gas leak, but first things first. Sapphire beat me to the next obvious question.

"Was anyone hurt?"

Orville hesitated. "Hurt, yes, but for what it was, it wasn't all that bad. The shop closed at three and everyone left. Then the owner remembered that he hadn't checked the gas stove in the break room before he left. Something he always did. It worried him enough to go back. When he flipped on the overhead lights, the whole place went up. Blew him back about ten feet, but he'll live."

"So, the leak was from a gas stove? Surely he would have smelled that before he left." Or at least before he flipped that light switch.

He nodded slowly. "One would think so, yes. But he swears he never smelled a thing. He said he has a cold. Least of his worries right now."

Thinking back, the man had sounded a little nasally. That could mess with one's sense of smell. But still...

"And they're sure it was a gas leak?" Sapphire asked.

Good question. We both stared at Orville.

He swallowed again. "Right now, that's the going theory, yes. But

it might be a day or two before that can be confirmed. The fire marshal will have to have time to do his investigation."

"So, it could have been a careless mistake, or it could have been arson. Right?"

Orville looked at me. "I know what you're thinking. First Reverend Castle, and now this. Well, stop thinking that! This isn't about our wedding. Who in their right mind would go to this much trouble just to stop two people from getting married? And we don't even know that this was anything more than a very coincidental and careless mistake."

True. But it sure didn't feel that way to me. Not to mention the fact that Orville had come straight here to tell me. That said something too.

I thought it was time to have another heart to heart discussion with Orville. But I didn't really want a witness for it.

Sapphire must have read my mind because she stood and looked down at me. "I need to be getting home to Archie. Don't let this stress you out. Invitations aren't a deal-breaker, you know. If all else fails, we'll print the darn things out ourselves. Amie is pretty creative with that sort of thing. I'm sure she can pull something spectacular together for us. Let me handle that part of things, okay?"

I nodded. Like I was going to complain about handing off another item on the list. That reminded me about the dress in her trunk, though. Orville and I saw her into her car, and I retrieved the wedding dress before she left.

"Please tell me it isn't bad luck for me to see the wedding dress before the wedding. I don't think we could take any more bad karma right now."

"I agree one hundred percent." I paused. "I think that only applies if the dress is actually on me. But even if that isn't the case, I still think we're safe here. This dress isn't going to look like this by our wedding."

He arched an eyebrow at me but didn't say anything.

"Have you arranged your tuxedo yet? Or are you going with just a suit? I'd be fine with that, you know."

Orville chuckled. "You might. But Sapphire wouldn't. Archie called me today from the airport. He's arranged a time for the two of us to go in and get fitted for tuxes. He insists the expense is on him." He fidgeted. "I'm not sure how I feel about that. I'm hoping I can change his mind. Especially as I don't think he's talking rented tuxedos here."

Neither did I. Renting wouldn't be the Mineheart way.

We went back inside, and I picked up the bouquet. I needed to get those daisies into water before they started to wilt. Orville followed me into the kitchen.

While I reached into the cupboard for a vase and filled it with water, Orville took the plastic wrapping off the flowers.

"Why is there a cake in the trashcan?"

"The Frankencake was too ugly to eat. That's what Sapphire said, anyway."

"I see. I'm guessing that was a failed experiment on a wedding cake?"

"It was." I plopped the flowers into the water and turned to face him, my arms crossed defensively. "I'm starting to feel like maybe this wedding wasn't meant to be, Orville."

He crossed the few steps between us and put his big, strong arms around me. Then he bent down and kissed the top of my head. Normally, I didn't like it when he did that. Today? Today, it felt comforting.

"I had a bad feeling you'd be feeling that way. That's why I came over as soon as I heard about that print shop. All I could think of was... what if?"

"You know omens are real, don't you?"

He squeezed me a little tighter to his chest. "I don't think of these as omens, Opal. Omens are things nature gives us, aren't they? What we have now is a man who was murdered by an actual human being and a building that was destroyed by what might turn out to be carelessness. Even if it turns out to be arson, we're still talking about a human being. Not nature. And not the Goddess. Do you really think She is against the two of us? After all she went through to get us together?"

Well, when he put it that way. He must have felt me relax a bit because he finally let me go and stepped back to give me a proper kiss.

"And just for the record, Opal Ravenswind, I intend to marry you on June fifth under the light of the full moon. Omens be danged. Understand?"

I nodded. I believed him.

I also believed he would do everything in his power to make sure that all this mystery was cleared away and dealt with long before our I dos.

Of course, he had his way of doing that, and I had mine.

THE NEXT MORNING WAS Sunday. My one and only true sleep in day of the week. Well, not this week.

Orville's wishes or no, I was determined to get involved at this point. It was just too important not to.

Now, don't take that as I sign that I don't trust my man had the

smarts and ability to do this on his own. I do. Totally. But we were working on a mighty close deadline, and a little help from me might just make the difference.

As long as I stayed away from the station and his official investigation, I should be fine. After all, a woman has a right to visit some of her neighbors, doesn't she? As far as I knew a little neighborly conversation wasn't against the law.

Even if, deep down in my heart, I knew it was against Orville's wishes. I'd just have to deal with that later. He would too.

First things first. Get the killer behind bars where they belonged. All the better if said killer had absolutely nothing to do with either of us or our upcoming wedding. But we wouldn't be able to rest assured of that until we caught them. At least I wouldn't.

Kimberly had supplied a list of all the younger girls in the congregation that she could recall. I'd be going online this afternoon to see if the church had some kind of member roster to make sure I didn't miss anyone. But for now, this was a good place to start.

Unfortunately, Kimberly wasn't so free with the information on who I should start with. I got that. Most of these girls were her friends. As much as the woman wanted to help me, she didn't want to hurt her friends, either.

To her mind, I'm kind of thinking the killer did the world a favor in taking out Reverend Castle. That wasn't a healthy way to look at things. That didn't mean it couldn't also be true. A man like that had no right being a shepherd of God.

But there was something I had to do even before my visiting rounds. I had some spell work to do.

What with everything going on, there was a whole lot of negative energy built up in this house. I needed it gone. As soon as possible too. Negative energy never helped anything, but it sure as heck could make things seem worse than what they actually were.

I hoped that was the case here. Get some positivity back in the house and see how that affected my feelings. Hopefully, it would be for the better. Give me a clearer head to work this thing through.

No spell bag for this one, either. Spell bags were great for last-minute spell casting, don't get me wrong. But for something this bloody important, I wanted fresh ingredients. Luckily, everything I needed was right in my back yard.

My witch's garden was one of the finest in the world. I'd stake good money on that. A sure bet, in my mind.

Gathering the ingredients was the part that took the longest. After that, it was just a matter of putting a match to them and walking around the house putting a little magic behind the smoke. And yes, there was a little chanting involved too. I kept it down, though. Just

because I wasn't taking advantage of sleep-in day didn't mean the same was true of the others.

The farmhouse wasn't a small one. By the time I'd cleared the energy of the downstairs, I was officially wiped out of magical power. The upstairs would just have to wait for tomorrow. I hardly ever went up there, anyway. And, as selfish as it may sound, right now I was thinking mainly of myself.

I needed a clear head, dang it all.

Flopping onto my sofa, I glanced at the clock. Not quite time yet for the church service to let out. I was fairly certain that the church would still have services today. They needed them now more than ever, things being what they were. I just hoped the traveling reverend was a better man than the last one that had taken that pulpit.

That was another reason I wanted to make my rounds today. It was Sunday. A lot of the girls I wanted to talk with either were still in school or held down jobs. I was going on the theory that Reverend Castle was more a hound dog than a pervert. That meant I was going to concentrate mostly on the girls over eighteen.

Part of that was because I really didn't want to think about it being different. If the man hadn't at least respected the age of majority, then I was afraid I'd have to agree more with Kimberly's whole take on his murder. Good riddance.

Plus, of course, I didn't like to think about a young teenage girl being a killer. Although, now that I thought about it, maybe that might lead to the killing being in self-defense? I could totally get behind that theory one hundred percent.

And if it was a younger girl involved, the killer could also be a father or mother that found out. Or an older boyfriend. Gah! My conversation with Kimberly had opened the door from no suspects to an abundance of them. Glancing at the short list of names in front of me, I truly had no idea where to start.

At least I'd had the forbearance to get Kimberly to give me their ages, as well as their names. That was something. Taking a deep breath, I decided to start with the oldest.

Cassidy Mallard. According to Kimberly, she was around her age, twenty-two. Yes, poor Kimberly had started having kids far earlier than she should have. Not that all of that had been her fault.

This girl was a young mother too. Only in her case, the father of her child had married her. At least that's what the word on the street was, anyway. As far as I knew, no paternity tests had ever been done. And I'd met the young family. Baby Samantha really didn't look all that much like her dad. And Cassidy had a bit of a reputation for not saying no to a man.

I pulled up a picture of the reverend to have his face clear in my

mind. There was a reason I was starting with Cassidy.

Knowing what I knew now, I kind of wanted a closer look at baby Samantha.

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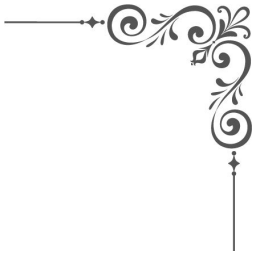

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Chapter 9

I spent the rest of the morning with my new family. I made a big breakfast, my personal way of paying back Kimberly for always taking on that Sunday morning early bottle feeding. Nancy covered through the week, but a young girl had the right to sleep in occasionally too.

So Kimberly got up earlier than the rest of us, and I made the big country-style breakfast. Here lately, Orville had taken to coming over to partake of the food too. Most likely because of all the fried foods involved. The man loved his fried bacon.

But then, who didn't?

Today though, it was just us. He was far too busy working on the Castle case to take time out for a huge breakfast. And that right there told me just how badly he wanted to put this to rest. I was right there with him on that too.

So much so that I fried up some extra bacon, made some extra toast, and planned to make a brief stop off at the sheriff station to drop off a nice little BLT sandwich for my man. It couldn't hurt to let the others there see that this thing between us wasn't going to just go away. No matter how much they wished that would be the case.

Not going to happen.

He wasn't there when I got there, but I left the sandwich in a nice little paper bag on his desk. It should keep there until he got back. And I pitied anyone who dared touch it before then.

As I said, my man loved his fried bacon, and I'd double stuffed that sandwich. Just for him. We'd work off the extra calories later. Right now, the man needed his protein.

I made sure to wave at Trixie and give her a big smile as I walked out the door. She waved back, but not with a smile. Which just caused mine to grow a little bigger.

Deal with it, sister. The sheriff is mine. Hands off.

From there, I drove the few blocks to the Mallard's residence. I sat there for a minute trying to gather up my wits about me before walking in. How could I work this?

Then I noticed her bright and colorful flower garden. Seemed like reason enough for a visit. A nice neighborly chat about her beautiful flowers and where she got them, or if she hired the work out, and all that. And of course, it would be the pleasant thing to do to console her

on the death of her reverend, now wouldn't it?

With a plan in place, I walked up her flower-lined path to the front door. It really was quite lovely. No lie involved there.

When Cassidy opened the door, she just blinked at me. "Opal Ravenswind? What are you doing here?"

I gave her my brightest smile. "I was driving by and saw your gorgeous flowers. I was wondering if I could pick your brain for a minute about them? I thought I knew every flower there was, but a couple of those I'm unfamiliar with." Okay, so one little fib. Sue me.

She stood a little straighter. "Why, thank you. I'd love to talk about my flower babies." She glanced over her shoulder into the house. "But it might have to wait a bit. We have another visitor at the moment."

And who should step up right behind her than Sheriff Orville Taylor. Darn it all. He must have walked. Otherwise, I'd have seen his car.

"Oh, I have no issues with Opal joining our conversation if you don't," he said, nodding to me.

Cassidy didn't look too sure about that, but she stepped aside to let me in anyway. Orville's warning look was enough for me to keep my mouth shut. Let him do the talking. Goddess knows I'd been with the man long enough to take that look for exactly what it was. A warning.

She offered me a cold soda, which I took her up on, and we all sat back down in the living room. I have to admit, young Cassidy had me impressed so far. A beautiful front yard, a nicely kept house, not all that usual for a new mother. Mr. Mallard had gotten quite a catch when he'd married her.

"So, back to our conversation," Orville said, giving me yet another 'keep your mouth shut' glance. "I believe I had just asked if either of you knew anyone who might have wished the reverend harm."

Mr. Mallard cleared his throat. "You mean besides me, right?"

Orville lifted an eyebrow and turned to him. "You wished him harm?"

"Well, maybe I didn't wish him dead, but harm, yeah sure I did. A lot of folks in town did. You want a list?"

The other eyebrow shot up. "A list would be most appreciated, yes." He took out his pocket notebook and a pen. "But let's start with your reasons and then get to the others."

Mallard looked over at Cassidy. She looked at me, then finally gave him a brief nod. "Go ahead. Tell them."

He looked over at Orville. "I'd really like it if we could keep this between us, mind you. Cassidy is a good wife and a good mom, and I don't want rumors starting back up about her again. Is that agreed?"

Orville nodded. "As long as what you tell me doesn't end up directly relating to an active case on my desk, I agree. If it does, I

don't."

Mallard thought about it and then nodded too. "That sounds fair." Then he looked at me.

"What is said here stays with us," I said. "On my word as a Ravenswind."

A witch is known by her word. At least, they are in a small town like Wind's Crossing.

"All right then," Mallard said. "Yes, I wished the man harm. But if'n I'd done it—which I didn't—I'd have strangled the man. Made him suffer while watching the life drain from his eyes. I've thought about it enough times to know that's how I would have done it."

Wow. There was a whole lot of hatred in those words.

"What did Reverend Castle do?" Orville asked.

"He violated my wife, that's what," Mallard answered. Then he hesitated. "Okay, so she wasn't my wife at the time, or the killer's work would have been done for him. But he took advantage of his position and a vulnerable girl. The man was a despicable human being."

Orville looked over at Cassidy, who appeared to be studying the carpet at her feet. "What happened?"

She took a deep breath, then finally raised her eyes to him. "I was doing a paper for my English class. We all had to do papers on a different profession. To be fair, the teacher made us draw names out of a hat. I got being a preacher."

"So you went to visit Reverend Castle."

"Yes. It seemed the logical place to start, with my own preacher. I mean, where else would I go? He invited me over for dinner to discuss the paper." Her voice lowered to almost a whisper. "I thought why not, I mean if you can't trust your preacher who can you trust?"

I couldn't take it any longer. I had to ask. "You were about eighteen when all this happened, weren't you?"

She met my eyes. "Yes."

Cassidy knew what I was asking. Her baby, Samantha, wasn't quite four years old. Said a lot, that.

"Did you tell him he was the father?" I asked. I felt Orville stiffen beside me, but Goddess bless him, he didn't say a word. But I could tell my question wouldn't have been one he would have thought to ask.

She looked away. "Yes. I needed help." Her eyes fell to her fidgeting fingers. "My reputation as an easy girl was vastly overestimated. I wasn't. It was all pretend and mean talk by the boys I dated afterward, trying to make it sound like they got something they didn't."

"So you knew exactly who the father was then. Why didn't you

make him take a paternity test?"

Cassidy glanced over at her husband. "She wanted to. But I put a stop to it. I'd been in love with Cassidy for years." He reached out and put a hand on her knee. "Her situation didn't change that, and her baby needed a good decent father. Not that piece of living scum."

I smiled at him. Mr. Mallard was impressing me as well. And what's more, the look Cassidy gave him let me know that the love was well reciprocated too. I didn't blame them for wanting our assurances that word of this didn't get out. Why feed the gossip mill when things had turned out as well as they had?

Orville leaned forward. "I'd be mighty interested in knowing just what Reverend Castle did when you told him."

Her face turned red. "He laughed. And then he said 'prove it' and walked away." She looked up at Mallard. "If Blake hadn't found me crying in the park, I don't know what I would have done." She grimaced. "Probably something really, really stupid."

Yeah. A lot of teenage girls made those same stupid decisions every single day. A lot of them learned to regret them later on in life too.

I was glad that hadn't happened with Cassidy.

And I was starting to get Kimberly's reluctance to talk about the whole thing too. If this got out, it could cause irreparable damage to this nice, happy little family. I didn't want that happening.

Orville looked at Mallard. "You mentioned a list?"

The man looked at his watch, then at Cassidy. "It's almost time for us to go pick up Sam from her playdate, sweetheart." He turned to Orville. "Is it okay if I write it up and drop it off at the station for you?"

Orville nodded slowly. "As long as I have the list by the end of the day, that should be fine. But I need that list. And make sure you put why the names are on it too."

"I will." We all stood, and Cassidy gave me a shy smile. "If you still want to talk about the flowers, could you maybe come back during the week? I work from home now."

"I'll do that." Mallard showed us out, but he hesitated before shutting the door behind us. We had already started walking toward my car. "Sheriff?" he called out.

Orville turned back with a questioning glance. "Yes?"

"I'll get you that list, but if you want to know who'll be right at the very top of it, here you go. You might want to have a chat with Kenny Driscoll, our local bookie. From what I understand, the good reverend was behind in paying off his losing bets."

And the door shut.

Once we got back to my car, Orville looked at me. "Flowers, huh? I would have thought a nature lover like yourself would know every

flower that ever even thought about growing in these parts."

I just blinked at him. "It got me in the front door, didn't it?"

He scrubbed his chin. "Actually, I think I might have had a little something to do with that, just so you know."

I'd have to give him that. Of course, if he hadn't already been there, that wouldn't have been needed. And with that being the case, I didn't feel his statement needed an answer.

Instead, I just looked at him. "But having me there came in handy, now didn't it?"

He grunted. "Okay, I'll admit I might not have made that leap about the father of their child. That witch's intuition of yours is a mighty powerful thing. One of the reasons I'm kind of eager to make our partnership thing an everyday reality." His stare bore straight into my eyes. "There's no way I'm keeping you out of this one, is there?"

I lifted a shoulder. "If it didn't affect me, then I'd stay out of it like you wanted me to. But the truth is, Orville, it sure feels like this is connected to me. To us. And with that being the case..."

"You're in the thick of it, whether or not I want you there."

"Looks that way, yes." I paused for a minute as the front door of the house opened and the Mallards came out. "You want a ride back to the station?"

He glanced back at the Mallards and then to me. "I think maybe I'd better walk. The less you're seen at the station the better, I think, until we resolve this thing one way or another."

Oops. "Well, I should warn you that I went there before coming here."

His eyes snapped back to me. "You did?" Was that a little bit of worry I saw in them?

"I felt bad because you missed out on our big Sunday breakfast, so I brought you a BLT. Double bacon too."

He relaxed a bit. "Oh, well, then. I guess I can make an exception for the bringing of food. Especially if that food happens to be bacon."

Yeah, kind of figured he'd feel that way.

But what mattered the most to me was that he was asking me to stay away from the station, not doubling down on me staying off the case. I'd take that as a green light to continue what I'd started.

I'd just be passing anything I learned to him in private. I could deal with that.

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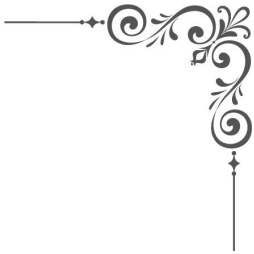

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Chapter 10

I had two more stops on my list of people to visit with, but neither of them panned out all that well. Nothing more learned. Still, I thought the day's investigative work had worked out rather well.

We'd learned that Reverend Castle had a history of taking advantage of young and vulnerable girls and that the man also had a gambling problem. Not bad for a day's work, I thought.

So, for the rest of the day I rested on my laurels. When the last friendly little visit was done, I went home to the farmhouse. My family could use a little Auntie Opal time, and truthfully, Auntie Opal could use a little family time too.

It went both ways, that.

We spent the evening playing board games and watching an old movie that the kids had picked out. It wasn't a movie I was familiar with, but the kids had found it at the library and it looked fun. Plus, it was rated for all ages, so it should be safe, right? It ended up being a parody western that very much reminded me of the old Road Runner cartoons. In fact, I think the scriptwriters took entire pages from Wile E. Coyote.

The movie did its work, and by the time we all headed off to bed, I was in a much more relaxed state. I'd needed the downtime. Tomorrow, though, would be a different matter.

Now that I had Orville's blessings on being part of the investigation (kind of), it was time to get busy.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE business at the shop hadn't slowed down from the week before. Normally, Kimberly handled the front of the shop and the customers, and I handled the back end of the shop. Bookkeeping, making spell bags and potions for our Goddess-loving customers, and basically doing what I wanted when I wanted.

With this many customers going through the shop, that wasn't possible. It took both of us helping customers and getting them back out the door with their purchases. The shop was doing a suddenly booming business, and here I was wishing it had waited a month or two.

Some business owner I am.

We had even wrangled the kids into helping out after school. As bigger items sold, that opened up floor space, and half the upstairs was filled with items just waiting for their chance at the limelight. We put the young ones to the task of filling up those empty spaces. At this rate, I'd have to step up my estate auction schedule. Sooner or later, I was going to run out of stock.

At least if that happened, we'd all catch a little break.

I'd kind of hoped to take a little time mid-morning to go and see Kenny Driscoll, our town bookie. As I'd told Orville before, the motives for murder were usually one of three: love, loathing, or loot. Maybe this time it was a simple case of loot. A debt collection gone wrong, maybe?

One could only hope it would turn out to be something so simple.

Unfortunately, that mid-morning break didn't happen. Not with the press of shoppers we had to deal with.

We closed the shop for our normal lunch hour. I grabbed a quick sandwich at the market and then made my way to Driscoll's little lair. You really couldn't call it anything else. His office, if you could even call it that, was in the basement of the local tavern. Dark, dusty, and with a damp smell that made me not want to linger there any longer than I absolutely had to.

Not that my leaving would be a problem for the owner. In fact, he seemed quite anxious for me to do so. Right from the time I walked in too.

Kenny took one look at me and backed a couple more feet away. He probably would have gone farther, but those two feet put his back right up against the wall. The man raised his hands out in front of him, in a defensive measure.

It kind of made me want to look behind me. I mean, what the heck was his problem?

"Now, Ms. Ravenswind, don't get your feathers all ruffled. A man has to make money when and where he can, you know. I never meant no harm or offense."

What the devil was he talking about? Some people in town tended to confuse witches with clairvoyants, and it would appear Kenny Driscoll was one of them. At least he was if he thought I had one little glimmer of an idea of what he was going on about.

I didn't. But then again, I didn't want to admit that to the man, now did I? In situations like this—and yes, they happen more frequently than you would think—I generally go quiet until the person in front of me gives me a little more to go on. I've gotten pretty good over the years at piecing things together.

It didn't take long. A couple of steps on my part and Kenny started talking.

“Look, it’s just a silly bet. Nothing to get worked up about, is it? Just some people having a little fun, that’s all.”

Beads of sweat popped out on Kenny’s brow. A bet, huh? That kind of gave me the information I needed right there. At least, I thought it did.

As for Kenny’s sweat, well, he knew the Ravenswinds were the real deal. His mother never would have given birth to the little weasel if we weren’t. It was one of our potions that had helped her with that. Not so sure at the moment that we’d actually done the woman any favors. But bottom line, he knew what we were. And what we could do.

“Tell me again why I shouldn’t be upset about this bet of yours?” There, that seemed safe. I didn’t want to go too far out on that limb without a little more. Even if I did have a pretty darn good guess.

“Well, this is a small town, you know? People talk, and some people aren’t really into sports or horses, but that don’t mean they don’t want to have a little gambling action, you know?” He blinked as a drop of sweat dripped down into his eye. “It’s just a little fun. I mean, I have bets going on all kinds of things. Not just your wedding. In fact, I have three wedding bets going right now alone.”

I took a deep breath. Yup. Just as I’d thought. People were betting that our wedding wouldn’t happen. Which brought up another point. Could someone have placed a large enough bet to make it worthwhile to step in and help it not happen? A quick glance around me showed that probably wasn’t the case. It didn’t look like Kenny was up to that large of a betting operation.

“What are the going odds?”

He blinked at me. Obviously not the response he’d been expecting. But the man was right. A bookie couldn’t afford to lose money in a situation like this. If he didn’t run the bet, someone else would. Still didn’t mean there wouldn’t be repercussions from it, though. I kind of think he got that too. Hence the sweating bullets.

“W-well, they went up when they found the reverend dead. Right now, th-they’re at three to one.”

“For or against?”

He swallowed. “A-against.” Then he stammered out, “But just so you know, my money’s on you and the sheriff getting hitched.”

Well, it would be, wouldn’t it? That’s where he’d be making the money.

“Put me down for twenty dollars. That wedding is going to happen.”

His mouth opened and shut a few times, but his hands finally came down and he pulled over a ledger book. After scribbling a bit in it, I handed over a twenty-dollar bill, and he handed me a written receipt.

I kind of thought it would make a nice memento for our wedding book. Something Orville might get a kick out of. Maybe I'd give it to him as a wedding present. Sounded about right. And if the odds didn't even out before then, it should triple in value too.

Now that our business was concluded, Kenny looked rather relieved. In fact, he kind of looked a little put out when I didn't turn and leave. But then I hadn't even gotten to the real reason behind my visit, had I?

"Seeing as how you brought up the reverend's death, I've got a couple of questions for you."

He gulped. "You do?"

"I do. I heard that Reverend Castle owed you quite a bit of money. That he had a bit of a gambling problem."

Kenny relaxed even further. Apparently, he felt he was on more solid ground now. He gave a small chuckle. "Just a bit, yeah. That man would bet on anything." He gave me a sideways look. "Want to know which side he bet for the wedding?"

I raised an eyebrow at him. "What I'd be more interested in knowing is why you let the man keep making bets with you when he owed you so much money. I'd also be interested in knowing just how deep in debt he was to you. And how that debt made you feel."

He was back to blinking at me. "You don't think I had anything to do with his murder, do you? You realize me killing him would be a stupid thing for me to do, right? You don't get money from a dead guy, just so you know."

"I'd still like my questions answered all the same."

A few more blinks. "Okay, he was in debt with me for a couple of grand. Quite a bit for my tiny little operation, and yes, I was getting a little worried that I might never see any money out of him. We had an agreement, though, that all current winnings would go toward past debts first." He winced. "Which might have helped a little if the man hadn't been on so long of a losing streak."

"Is that why you let him keep betting? For the possibility of getting your money back? Sounds kind of at counter-purposes to me."

Kenny took a deep breath. "You got that right. But I felt sorry for the guy. First, he loses his wife, then..." he stopped.

Yeah, like I was going to let him stop on that note. "Then what?"

He glanced around, but there wasn't anyone else in the shop. And as it was a one-room deal, there shouldn't have been anyone around to overhear us. Still, he lowered his voice. "According to the rev, this girl showed up on his doorstep a while ago, claiming to be his daughter. It shook him up pretty bad. Who knows how many kids a man has out there in the world, you know?"

"How long ago did she show up? And just how old was she?" Her

age made all the difference.

He shrugged. “Not sure of the date. The rev told me about it a few months back. I think he just needed to tell someone he could trust.”

“And who can you trust if you can’t trust your bookie, correct?”

He smiled at me. “Something like that, yeah.” Then he paused. “As for the girl’s age? All I can say is that I’m pretty sure she would have been conceived during the reverend’s marriage, you know? Not the kind of thing he’d want to get out, now is it?”

“I could definitely see that being the case.” I hesitated. “I don’t suppose he gave you a name?”

“Nope. Didn’t ask him, either. Some things it’s just better not to know.” He paused and looked at me. “Are you really okay with the whole wedding bet thing? I have to admit, I’ve been finding it kind of hard to sleep at night with it going on.”

I gave him the sweetest smile I was capable of. “You should be,” I said. Then I turned around and walked out.

What could I say? He deserved a little worry in his life.

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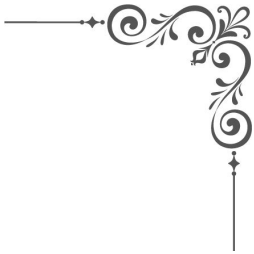

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Chapter 11

By the time I made it back to the shop, the wind had picked up. From the dark clouds rolling in, it looked like we were in for quite a storm. Time to batten down the hatches.

I walked in to find Kimberly anxiously looking out the back-shop window. She looked over to me with worry in her eyes. “This looks like tornado weather to me.”

Anyone who had spent any time living in a little metal box had a healthy fear of tornados. Smart people had that fear, even without that living experience. They weren’t things to mess around with.

“Have there been any sightings?”

She shook her head. “No.” She shivered just a bit. “Just the hair standing on end at the back of my neck. I think this one is going to be bad.”

I glanced up at the clouds. She just might be right about that. “You think we should close up the shop and head home?” We had a basement there. That wasn’t the case at the shop.

Kimberly hesitated but finally shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. We’re closer to the kids’ school here. I think that’s more important.”

She would. Mothers thought things like that. I know I always did.

“Well, if you start feeling different, you let me know and we’ll head out.”

As it was, closing up shop turned out to be a necessity. That’s because as I was going to turn the sign on the door to open, the lights flickered twice and then went out.

And with all those black clouds overhead, getting sunlight through the windows really wasn’t a possibility. It got dark quick. Kimberly came through from the back room with a flashlight. “How’s about we put a couple of these antique kerosene lanterns to good use?”

I nodded. Sounded good to me, and I always kept a bit of kerosene on hand for just that purpose. Within minutes, we had the place lit up again. Not quite as bright, but at least we could see well enough.

“Open up or stay closed?” Kimberly looked at me.

It was a fair question. I was old-fashioned in the running of my store. Nothing here really that we couldn’t do just as well with or without electricity. But why look a gift horse in the mouth? Having an

afternoon to catch up on backroom stuff might not be such a bad thing.

Besides, with the electricity out, we would likely be the only store in town to be open, which meant we just might be even busier than ever. Not something I felt like handling right at the moment. Some fools didn't know well enough to stay inside and out of the rain. Not if meant getting a bargain.

"I'd say we stay closed. We can still hang out here until school lets out. Then we can just collect the kids and go home. Unless, of course, the lights come back on."

Not that getting the power back that quickly was a likely scenario. Last time the power had gone out in Wind's Crossing, it had taken a full day to get it back. I wasn't expecting this time to be much different.

Kimberly hugged herself. "Sounds good to me." Then she looked around her. "What can I do to earn my pay?"

I laughed. The girl was funny sometimes. "You've earned a heck of a lot more than what I've been paying you the last few days. Take it easy and put your feet up for a change. Or you could go upstairs and stretch out on that mattress up there. Take a good nap."

She shivered. "I think I'll stick to downstairs if that's okay with you."

Oh, yeah. I hadn't thought about that. "No problem." I nodded to one of the lanterns even as I grabbed the other one. "Let's ride this out in the backroom. Less glass back there."

THE STORM BLEW OVER pretty quickly. At least the rain part of it did. By the sound of it hitting the windows of the shop, there might have been a few hail balls mixed in there too. It kind of worried me about my car parked out there in the open in the back lot. She might be an old beauty, but she was still a beauty. But the shop didn't have a garage, so the best we could do was ride it out and hope for the best.

The wind, however, didn't die down. If anything, it picked up. Kimberly wasn't the only one who was relieved when it was finally time to pick up the kids and head for the hills, so to speak. That basement was a comfort in times like this.

Not that my basement was nice and furnished or anything. It wasn't. Actually, most people would probably just call it a cellar. Dirt floor and cement walls... it wasn't anything pretty. But pretty wasn't a necessity. Safety was.

And that cramped little space was optimized to the hilt for safety. Right down to a crank-powered emergency radio, kerosene lantern, flashlight, blankets, and a whole army backpack of bottled water and

food supplies.

A person could live down there for a week if need be. The thought of being trapped in a cellar under a ton of rubble and starving to death wasn't one I enjoyed. Hence the preparation.

Orville wasn't the only boy scout around here. Of course, I wasn't a boy, and I'd never been a scout, but still. A witch was kind of close if you were willing to stretch your mind a bit.

The storm didn't bother the kids one bit. If anything, they were excited by the possibility of spending time in the basement cellar. But I knew that excitement wouldn't last long if we had to retreat to it. Nothing much to do down there. I should probably think about adding some games to that preparation.

Maybe I wasn't as prepared as I thought I was.

I kept my ear out for the town's tornado siren, and Kimberly kept her ear to the local news, but no warnings or watches ever came. Other news did, though. According to the local station, our power was out because of multiple trees down, and it would take a while for electricity to be restored.

Out this far from town, even if it was just a few miles, it would be even longer. They always took care of the bigger areas with more people affected first. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't really fault them for that.

But all those news stories of trees down started my mind wandering to that sacred hilltop behind the house. What if?

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to know.

Kimberly gave me an odd look when she saw me putting on my rain poncho. The rain could always start up again, and besides, the poncho served as a good windbreaker too.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I grunted at her. "Trees down. I have to check the clearing at the top of the hill. I have to know."

She gave a pointed glance out the window, where tree limbs in the yard were still dancing in the wind. "What's done is done, Opal, and it isn't safe."

I shrugged. I knew that. But I also knew I had to go. My overworked brain and stressed-out heart weren't giving me a choice in the matter.

"I'll watch out."

I grabbed one of the kerosene lanterns and filled it up, then lit it. The glass case would keep the flames from going out, and those woods were likely to be pretty darn dark.

The lantern gave just enough light to see me to the top of the hill. Where my worst fears were realized.

There, where the clearing had been, there was only chaos. A large

oak tree had uprooted by the root balls and fallen completely over, covering most of the area of the clearing. And with all the tree limbs everywhere, it was hard to tell where that tree stopped and the general chaos began.

My sacred clearing, the place where I received my Goddess's blessing every full moon, was gone. It was just too much to bear.

"OPAL?"

Orville's voice came from directly behind me. I refused to look back at him, hoping in my heart that he'd just go away. I didn't want anyone to see me this way. Crying and broken. Not even the man I loved with all my heart.

Of course, there was no way he would do that. No, the man came to sit beside me on the soggy, wet ground.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, looking at the crisis before us. When I finally got my weeping under control, he spoke.

"This isn't as bad as it looks, you know. I can have a tree guy up here in the morning. The clearing will be as good as new in a couple of days. Long before we have to start preparing it for the wedding."

"I'm not sure there's going to be a wedding. I think I made a bad bet."

He looked at me, his brows furrowed. "Please tell me you aren't serious about that."

I still wouldn't look at him. I'd spent the past hour thinking about that very thing. It was one thing when the omens came from man. It was a totally different thing when they came from the Goddess herself.

That tree had stood for well over a hundred years. It had been strong and healthy and beautiful. And a small part of me felt I was the cause of its demise. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

"You said I shouldn't take the omens too much to heart because they were from man, not nature." I gestured weakly in front of us. "Well, nature sure told you."

He just swallowed and went into thoughtful mode. Another few minutes passed.

"Don't do anything rash, okay? No calling off the wedding, no telling anyone you're having doubts about it. Not for a week. Seven days. Opal, after all we've been through, can you give me seven days to put all this right? Please?" His voice cracked on that last word, and it just about broke my heart.

As if it hadn't already been breaking.

"Seven days, Orville," I whispered. "But if the omens don't start going the other way, the wedding is off. I couldn't bear what might

come next.”

I meant it too. If the universe didn’t want me getting married, who knew what it might take from me next?

Next time, it might just be Orville himself. That wasn’t a risk I was willing to take.

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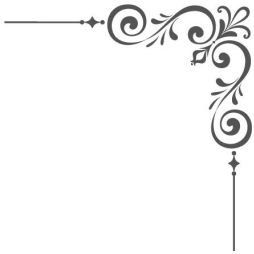

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Chapter 12

The next morning, I threw myself into the shop work. Which wasn't as easy as it sounded, as we still didn't have power. But who needed power when there was work that you could do without it?

And, as the school was out because of the lights too, we even had the tiny little beings to use for manual labor. Don't report me. They didn't work all that hard at it.

We opened the curtains as wide as they would go, and the bright morning sun helped to provide light. I waffled on opening the shop but the truth was, I just wasn't up to seeing people. Even being around family was tough right now. Especially ones like Kimberly, who kept giving me that look.

She knew something was wrong with me. Really, really wrong. But, Goddess love her, she wasn't about to pry until I was ready to talk about it. I wasn't sure that would ever come to pass.

The kids demanded a break about mid-morning, and I agreed. Looking at the main shop, I allowed myself a brief moment of pride. My shop is never all that dusty, but right now, it shined. And there was that wonderful, clean lemon scent in the air too. We'd have to do this joint-effort cleaning thing more often if it got results like this.

Almost made me want to throw open the shop just so people could see it at its best. Almost.

Unfortunately, the break did something besides just give us a chance to rest before tackling the upstairs. It gave me time to think again. That wasn't a good thing right now. Not with the thoughts in my head.

I was reaching for my phone to do something I hadn't done in over five years. I was going to cancel date night. Part of that was the fact that I just didn't think I could bear to be alone with Orville right now. I'd agreed to give him seven days to clear up this whole murder and omen thing, but that didn't mean we'd be spending a heck of a lot of time together while he tried to do that.

Personally, after that downed tree, I kind of thought it was a lost cause.

But I didn't get a chance to make that call. The phone rang in my hand. My daughter, Ruby.

"Hey, Mom!" Her voice was bright and happy. Just what I needed.

Maybe the Goddess hadn't totally turned her back on me after all.

"Good morning, Ruby. How are things in your neck of the woods?"

"Pretty good, actually. Amie and I just brought in a fairly big bounty jumper, and we wanted to celebrate. So we're inviting the whole family over for dinner tonight. Orville, Kimberly, and the kids too, of course. Amie and I are even cooking! What do you think about that?"

It all sounded good to me. Well, with the possible exception of including Orville. But if we all rode over together, there wouldn't be a real chance for us to be alone, now would there? And it would keep me from having to break a long-running date night streak too. Not that the streak had much meaning right now with the possible end of it all in sight.

"Can I ask what the menu is?" I knew my daughter and my niece. To say they weren't at home in the kitchen would be putting it mildly.

"Nope. We're gonna surprise you. But don't worry, we're making more than one thing, so we're covering our bases."

"Okay," I said slowly. Might be worth making a casserole to take along, just in case. "Can I bring anything to help?"

"Hm. Well, we wouldn't say no to a nice bottle of wine to go with dinner."

"White or red?"

She laughed. "Does it ever really matter?"

Well, no, not with us it didn't. But I wasn't so sure about the Minehearts. They were a whole lot fancier than us. But I'd pick up a bottle of each, just to be safe.

The phone was still in my hand, but it took me more than a minute to make the next call. Orville answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Opal." He paused for a second. "I've been wanting to call you all morning..." His words trailed off.

"Oh? Is something up?"

"No. I was just that worried about you. You, well, you weren't yourself last night. And for good reason too. I just needed to know that you were okay. You being the one to call me, though, means a lot. Thank you. Unless, of course..." He trailed off again.

"I'll keep our bargain, Orville. I was calling about date night. There's been a change of plans."

Silence.

"Orville?"

"You're canceling date night?" His voice was more than a little strained. The man was hurting. And all because of me. I didn't like that.

"Not canceling so much as giving it a change in venue. The girls have invited the whole family over for a family dinner tonight. To

celebrate a big bounty bust or something. We're supposed to bring wine." I paused. This next part was the part I'd have to sell. "I thought maybe we could all ride together?"

My car was old enough to still have bench seats in the front. It would be cramped, but we could do it.

"That only makes sense, doesn't it? But can I be the one driving?"

"When have you ever gotten an argument from me on that?"

He chuckled. "I love you, Opal."

I smiled at the phone even though my heart was still in the process of breaking apart. "I love you too, Orville. That will never change, you know."

"To the moon and back again, Opal." There were voices behind him. The station sounded busy. Not that it was ever really all that quiet. "What time should I pick you all up?"

"Dinner's at six, so say around five? That way, if the girls need any last-minute help, I'll be there to oblige."

"See you at five." He didn't hang up like he normally did. "And I should warn you that I have a surprise for all of you."

Then he hung up. Darn the man, anyway. He knew I wasn't big on surprises.

THAT STUPID SURPRISE thing of his was a ploy. I just knew it. He was probably thinking it would give me something else to stew on besides the whole canceling the wedding thing. Not that he was wrong in that. It did.

The only thing that saved me from driving myself batty about it was the fact that he'd said it was a surprise for all of us. Not just me. That made a big difference. I didn't mind nice surprises for my family so much. And if it was coming from Orville, it would be a nice one. Not a doubt in my mind about that.

Come to find out, it was a very nice surprise indeed. Thinking back to it, he'd kind of given me a hint with the whole 'what time should I pick you all up' question. I'd thought it was just a slip of the tongue as we'd be taking my car.

It wasn't.

Orville pulled onto the drive at the farmhouse at five minutes till five in a van. We all piled out to give it the once over.

It wasn't new, or anything like new. It had a few years on it, but it didn't look bad and the engine had a nice, smooth sound to it.

He smiled over at Kimberly. "I got tired of waiting for Opal to upgrade and give you her car, so I decided to beat her to it. The van's all yours, Kimberly. It'll seat seven, so we can all go places together in one vehicle. Even invite Gray along, if you want to."

Kimberly just blinked at him. It was obvious she didn't know what to say. For once, neither did I. This was an awesome gift, with a lot of meaning behind it. The van said we were a family and were going to be sticking together.

So yeah, I was speechless too. My man had just upped the pressure, and he knew it too. He would not make this any easier on me than he had to. In fact, just the opposite. He was determined to change my mind.

Not that the van was bought with that in mind. Knowing Orville, he'd had the thing for weeks and was just waiting for the first time we needed it to let the cat out of the bag. Just the kind of thing he'd do.

He glanced at me. "I know I said I'd drive, but how about we let Kimberly test out her new wheels?"

I nodded. That was fine with me.

Kimberly walked around the van, making little sounds as she went. When she finally made it back to Orville, she threw her arms around him. "Thank you! I've been looking for a new vehicle, and this is perfect. But I'm going to pay you back for this, you know."

"Nope. I won't take one red cent. I got it at a steal from an online police auction. People on the force got first dibs, so I took them up on it." He tapped the hood. "Low mileage, too, only used to run a little home-made moonshine across state lines every other weekend."

"Moonshine? Oh, I love that!" She eyed the side of the van. "Would you mind if I had Gray take a crack at painting it? Maybe a full moon wolf scene or something?"

He laughed. "It's yours, so go for it."

Personally, I thought the wolf moon scene would be especially appropriate for their family vehicle. What with baby Pearl being a high-powered witch and Gray being a werewolf. But then, she didn't know any of that yet. Not unless Gray had come out to her. And I was betting that he was waiting a bit to do that.

We grabbed our stuff from the house, switched baby Pearl's car seat base over to the van, and headed out.

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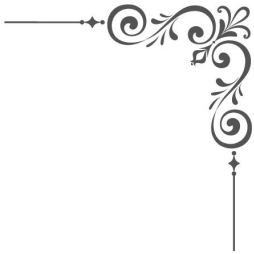

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Chapter 13

I knew as soon as I walked into Amie's house that this was an intervention of some sort. There was wedding stuff everywhere. I gave Orville an evil glare but he just shook his head and took a step back. He wasn't claiming responsibility, and my man didn't lie.

So this was all just rotten timing. And here I'd been looking forward to a night with the full family. Funny how it had never crossed my mind that the upcoming wedding would be the full focus of the evening.

Ruby gave me a big bear hug. "Sapphire told us how stressed-out you were about putting together the wedding, so we're pitching in. Consider us your new wedding planners. I've already got a line on some beautiful silk flower bouquets, and I'll start on the trellis archway and the flowers for that tomorrow."

"And I'm in charge of photography and wedding invitations," Amie said with a grin. "Both are kind of up my alley, you know."

Sapphire (she and Archie had beat us there) grinned at me. "Unless I'm missing something, that just leaves me with doing the cake, and I think I've got a handle on that, too, by the way, and you with the dresses. It's all coming together."

I swallowed and nodded. It was all coming together, all right. Right up until the time when I pulled the plug.

Orville threw an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. Not that he had to worry. I'd given him my word on the seven-day thing. But the thought of putting my family through all of this for nothing... but then again, there would still be a wedding, wouldn't there? Just a single instead of a double. The universe hadn't seemed to take exception to the union of Sapphire and Archimedes.

Not that I held that against them. Not at all. I wished only the best for my sister. Her new husband, too. As much to my surprise, I found that I was growing rather fond of the man myself.

It's just that I truly wished with all my heart that the universe had done the same for me and Orville. But no. Perhaps I was destined to be the crone of the coven forever. Who was I to try to change my destiny for personal happiness? At least, that's what the universe seemed to be asking. A witch could take a hint.

The first part of the evening really put my acting skills to the test. I

smiled and tried to join in on the wedding talk, as I knew they expected it of me. But my heart just wasn't in it. How could it be? The only way I made it through was by pretending we were simply planning Sapphire's wedding and keeping my own interest in it out of it.

Not that it worked, but I tried.

Amie, Goddess bless her, helped me tremendously mid-meal by changing the subject to the recent demise of Reverend Castle. Yes, technically it could be seen as still connected with the upcoming wedding, but at least it served to get everyone's focus off the ceremony.

I'd take any port in a storm right now.

"So, how is the investigation coming?" she asked.

Orville shook his head. "It's a nightmare. I went from having no suspects to having half the town having a reason to kill the man. Right now, I'm just trying to narrow down the top suspects. Come to find out, the reverend wasn't the man I'd thought he was. Not by half."

Amie nodded. "Yeah, that's kind of what I've heard too."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Oh? You've been looking into the case too? Any insights come up that you'd like to share?"

"I hope me stepping in doesn't upset you." She paused. "But I kind of needed something to do, and I thought it might help out. But so far, all I've found out is that Reverend Castle didn't deserve the title of Reverend. Which it sounds like you already knew."

"Cheating on his wife, taking advantage of young women, and gambling. That's what I've got so far. You find anything to add to that?"

"Unfortunately, no. That's my list so far too. I'll send you the names I've come up with, though, so you can compare notes. Most likely you have more on your list than I have on mine." She took another bite, then chewed thoughtfully. "I don't suppose I could get access to any security footage you might have?"

He shrugged. "You're more than welcome to take a look, but there's nothing there. My dispatcher had some time on her hands, so she took the initiative to contact area business with outside cameras. There were only two that covered the area of the church. And unfortunately, they only covered the front entrance. Nothing at all on camera within an hour of the time of death. Wind's Crossing goes pretty quiet once the shops and stores close."

"Believe me, I remember that." She hesitated. "Still, I wouldn't mind taking a look, if you don't mind. I have some equipment that I can use to maybe see something she might have missed."

"Knock yourself out. I'll send the files over to you tomorrow."

And then the talk went back to the wedding again. As in, who we

were going to get to officiate the ceremony.

I just couldn't catch a break.

AS HARD AS IT WAS, I survived. I think Orville had counted on driving us all home and then having me take him back to his house. But that wasn't going to happen.

Besides, we went right by his place on the way to the farmhouse. Even he had to admit that it made no sense to have to double back to bring him home.

He turned to me as he got out of the van. "Thank you for tonight, Opal. I know in my heart that things are all going to work out." He was being somewhat cryptic for good reason. We had an audience.

I swallowed and met his eyes. My vision was just a little blurry from the unshed tears. "We should know within a week, either way."

Orville took a deep breath and nodded. We waited until he made it inside and then drove off. I think it surprised Kimberly I didn't stay with him. Luckily, she didn't question it.

Good woman.

We made quick work of putting the kids to bed. We'd come home to find the lights back on and everything in good shape. It was a close call, but we managed to save the food in our freezer and refrigerator. The bags of ice that Gray had dropped off that morning saved us.

By the time we got everything sorted out, I was more than ready to call it a day. Kimberly was still giving me odd looks, but she wasn't intruding into my personal space. Hopefully, that would last for another week.

I wasn't so sure I wouldn't burst into tears at a single, well-meant question. I was that close to losing it right now.

While my body was exhausted, and my mind too, for that matter, sleep wasn't easy to come to me. It never was when I was upset and emotional. And I'd never been that emotional in all my life.

There, in the quiet of my room, doors shut between me and the rest of the household, I wept. Long and hard. I owed myself that release.

It took me a while in my grief and heartache to realize that I was no longer alone in my bedroom.

I didn't even have to open my eyes to know who it was. Her glow could be felt as well as seen.

"I'm not sure I'm in the mood to listen to anything you have to say right now. If you're here to tell me this is all for the best, you can just leave right now."

Not the way a High Priestess should talk to her Goddess, but I meant every single word.

“Opal Ravenswind, my beautiful child, I owe you an apology. Please, will you hear me out?”

I took a staggered breath, which was about all I was capable of at the moment, and opened my eyes. There She was beside my bed in all Her glory. Normally, that sight gave me comfort. Tonight, it only made me angry.

My mouth opened, but at the last possible second, I closed it before speaking. If I was about to burn all my bridges to the Goddess, I might as well take a few minutes to let her say her piece first.

She motioned for me to scoot over, and I did. She sat on the edge of the bed and laid one hand on my arm.

“I’m afraid when I made you and your family my team, I might have done you a disservice. The others now seem intent to wreak havoc in your lives. I’ve done what I can to contain their efforts, but the Goddess tree…” A single tear flowed down her face. “They managed to slip that by me. That one wasn’t directed at you, Opal, but at me. A warning that I might not be able to protect all of you as well as I had thought I could.”

I swallowed and stared at her. “You didn’t strike the tree down as an omen for me to stop the wedding?”

She blinked at me. “Why on earth would I have done that? Your union with Orville Taylor is well blessed by me. You should know that. My goodness, but the things I had to do to make that work out in the end. You know, he almost didn’t return to Wind’s Crossing after his stint in the Army?” She gave me a small smile. “Something about not being up to being around the woman he loved while she loved another.”

That lead to interesting future questions, but I didn’t want to get off track this quickly in the conversation. I wanted confirmation of her earlier words first.

“You give our wedding your blessings?”

Her smile said it all. “The two of you are meant to be together, Opal. That has always been your destiny, even if it took you long enough to see that. You should know that by now.” Then her smile slipped. “But, as I said, when I created Team Destiny as you all call it, I also seemed to have put targets on all of you.”

“You’re saying we’re in danger? Orville, Ruby, and all the others?”

“You as well, Opal. The other entities can’t act directly against any of you, though, so there is that small comfort. But they can certainly make it seem like omens are occurring when they are not.” She made a face. “And I’m afraid they can make your lives… rather interesting as the old curse goes.”

The Goddess leaned down and kissed my cheek. The warmth of it went straight to my quickly mending heart. The Goddess’s kisses were

mighty powerful things.

"Good is always in danger from Evil."

I nodded slowly. "But we still have you on our side."

Her entire body glowed as she beamed down at me. "From now until the end of time, Opal Ravenswind. I will be there for you."

I hesitated before asking the next question. It was too important to leave it unasked. "If I marry Orville, will I be putting him in mortal danger?"

Her fingers grazed my cheek in a loving caress. "Orville and you alike are in mortal danger from Evil every day of your lives, Opal. That is because of who and what the two of you are. Wouldn't you rather be by his side to help him rather than send him off to fend for himself?"

I swallowed and resolve filled my body. Evil wouldn't win. Not this time.

"Goddess, you know I treasure your visits beyond measure, so I hope you won't take offense when I ask you to leave now. I have a rather important phone call to make."

She smiled down at me. "I rather thought you might."

And I was alone again.

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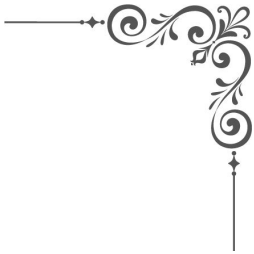

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Chapter 14

It took Orville four rings to answer. That wasn't like him at all. Not even at this time of night. I'd personally seen that man come out of a dead sleep and answer a call within seconds. I kind of thought that ability came with the title of Sheriff.

I was just about to hang up and take a drive over to his place when he finally picked up. His voice was breathless. "What's wrong?"

Hesitating, I listened closely. There were sounds in the background. Orville wasn't home. "Nothing's wrong... but you're on a call, aren't you? We can talk in the morning."

"Don't hang up! Just give me a minute." I heard some muffled conversation come through, then a minute later he was back with me. "I know you wouldn't have called me at this godforsaken hour unless it was something urgent. Just tell me already. My night can't get much worse."

Now my guilt ratcheted up. Technically, what I was calling for wasn't urgent at all. It could easily have waited until morning. Why had I thought differently?

"I'm sorry, Orville. I should have waited. I just didn't want you stewing any longer than necessary. The wedding is back on... if you still want me."

"And just like that, my night got a whole heck of a lot better. Thank you, Opal, I needed to hear that right now." There was a pause. "Now I want you to remember your words when I give you the latest news, okay? I'm holding you to them."

"What's happened?"

"I am on a call. Kenny Driscoll's body was just found. Method of death looks pretty dang similar to that of Reverend Castle, too, so I'm going to go on the assumption that we're looking at the same killer. We'll know more after the coroner gets through with her assessment."

I took a deep breath. My first thought was that at least the townsfolk couldn't blame this death on my upcoming wedding, but with that bet circulating around they probably could. In fact, I just might be a suspect myself. Especially seeing as how I'd just visited the man yesterday.

A fact which, what with the fallen tree and all the storm excitement, I had yet to share with Orville.

“You should know that I went to see Driscoll on Monday. Guess that puts me on the suspect list, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, Opal.” I heard a shout from behind him and his muffled answer to them. “Look, I’m going to want to hear all about your visit with Driscoll, but right now, I have to process this scene. Can you come to the station after you drop the kids off at school? Give me a statement?”

“See you then, Orville.” And then a split second later, I added, “Please take care, okay? Evil has its sights on the two of us.”

“I’m not sure I understand that, but I’ll watch my back. You do the same with yours.” His voice lowered. “And Opal? Thanks again for calling. I can handle this a lot better now. Love you.”

He hung up before I could say it back.

I put the phone on the nightstand and rolled over. “I love you, too, Orville.”

And yes, I might have shed a few more tears before I finally drifted off to sleep. But at least these were happy ones.

MY STEP WAS DEFINITELY lighter the next morning. I know that probably sounded terrible, what with there being another death and a possible serial killer on the loose. But it was true all the same.

Kimberly noticed right off the bat too. “It looks like whatever’s been bugging you the last few days must have resolved itself.”

I nodded. “It did. Thanks for giving me my space on that, by the way. I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

She smiled at me. “Believe me, it wasn’t. It’s never easy to watch someone you care about going through rough times.” She stared me right in the eyes. “Especially when they don’t seem to trust you enough to talk to you about it.”

“It wasn’t a trust issue, I promise.” I hesitated. I really didn’t want to go into the whole thing. But I had to give the girl something, and besides, the whole not saying anything for seven-day thing shouldn’t be valid anymore, right? “I guess I was just having cold feet about the wedding. What with everything going on and all.”

Kimberly frowned. “You don’t think Reverend Castle’s death had anything to do with your wedding, do you? That man was scum. Lots of people wanted him... well, gone.”

I shrugged. “A witch puts a lot of trust in omens. And there have been a fair few of them piling up lately.”

She nodded. “I’ll give you that.”

We went through all the motions and actions to get the kids off to school, then drove to the shop. Crapsnackles. A day and a half of the shop being closed because of the power outage, and there were

literally people lined up at the door.

What the heck was going on with my shop's sudden popularity boom?

As it wasn't quite nine yet, we made our way to the backdoor and let ourselves in. I was halfway tempted to put up another closed for the day sign in the window, but Kimberly seemed pumped by all the business we'd been getting. I hated to disappoint her.

"You think you can handle the shop on your own with that crowd out there? I need to pay a visit to the sheriff. Kenny Driscoll was killed yesterday, and I need to give a statement."

The odd look was back. "Why would you have to do that? I never thought you were the betting type."

"I'm not." Although I had made an exception to that rule on Monday. How could I not place a bet on my own bloody wedding? "But I went to see him on my lunch hour the other day, and he let me know that he had a bet running on the wedding. Guess that kind of makes me a lead suspect at the moment."

"Oh, Opal, what rotten timing."

Yeah. Tell me about it.

I helped her run through the shop, making sure things were in functioning order with the power back on in full, then we opened the shop. A few minutes later, I was on my way toward the sheriff's station.

Orville met me halfway. "Let's have our little meeting at the Flour Pot." He didn't give me a chance to answer, just took my elbow and turned me right around.

Like I was going to argue about a visit to the Flour Pot. They had my Raspberry Delights there. Of course, I probably should be watching my calories right now. I did have a wedding dress to fit into in a few weeks.

Although, now that I thought about it, I didn't. Not yet. I still had to make the darn thing. The good thing was, I only had to make half a dress. The bad thing was, I had to make two of them.

Once we got our order at the counter, we took a seat at the farthest table from the center of the shop. The owner was a smart man. He didn't offer free internet here. Nope. He wanted people to come in, get their donuts and coffee, and get out. As such, he only had a few tables, and most of the time at least one was free.

Orville took a bite of his donut and groaned—Raspberry Delights can cause that—before he looked at me. "Okay, I think I'm properly prepared now. Tell me about your visit to Kenny Driscoll."

"Okay, but before I do... did you know the man had a bet running on whether or not our wedding would actually happen?"

His face scrunched up. That kind of told me the answer. "You

knew about that, huh?" He took a deep breath. "You know that doesn't help your whole being on the suspect list thing, right?"

"I do."

Then his eyes met mine over the table. "Is that why you went to see him?"

I could totally have said yes. I mean, Orville had made it plain to me that he wanted me to stay out of the investigation. If I said yes, then he would never have to know that I was still encroaching on his job. But this was Orville. The man I was going to spend the rest of my life with. It simply wouldn't do to go down that slippery slope.

"No. I didn't find out about the bet until my visit. He was the one that told me."

He frowned at me. "You went to talk about Reverend Castle's gambling debt, didn't you?"

"I did."

To his credit, he was handling this rather well. He had to know that asking me to stay out of an investigation that the whole town kind of thought was necessary because of me and my possibly hexed wedding was out of line. And I hadn't gotten in the way of any of his officers, so he really couldn't grumble too much about it, either.

"And?"

"Well, once I convinced him that I wasn't there to put a spell on him, he was so relieved that we had a nice little conversation." I glanced around. No one appeared to be listening in on us. What few people were in the little shop were all at the counter, giving us a pretty wide berth. Probably didn't want the hex to rub off on them. Can't say I blamed them all that much, truth be told.

I lowered my voice all the same. "Did you know that Reverend Castle had an illegitimate daughter show up on his doorstep a while back?"

Orville almost choked on the bite he'd just taken. After a brief coughing spree and a drink of coffee to clear his throat, he looked at me. "He what? Who?"

Shrugging, I shook my head. "Driscoll didn't know the who. Only that Reverend Castle was more than a little worried that the girl might make it public knowledge."

"He didn't happen to mention a timeframe, did he? Like when this girl showed up on that doorstep?"

"According to Driscoll, the reverend told him about it a few months ago. He made it sound like it had happened fairly recently before that. Either that or the girl was ramping things up. He said Reverend Castle was pretty upset by it."

"Well, yeah, I can see that. His wife hasn't been gone all that long." Orville paused long enough to polish off his second donut.

“Anything else?”

I couldn’t control my blush. And his slow smile told me he was enjoying this a little too much.

“Nothing about Reverend Castle, no.”

By now, he was grinning at me. “You placed a bet, didn’t you?”

I gave him a short nod. “I did. Do you have a problem with that?”

He chuckled. “Not as long as you bet for the wedding to happen.” Then he looked at me. “You did, right?”

“Of course, I did.” Something about his expression made me ask. “I don’t suppose you had any dog in that fight too?”

“I may have put a chunk of green down on the two of us.” He leaned back. “Not sure we’re ever going to see anything from it, though. I think Driscoll left his clients high and dry. No backup bookie that I know of.”

Not something I was going to lose sleep over. If you couldn’t afford to lose the money you were betting, you shouldn’t be betting it in the first place. His clients all just lost, that’s all.

“I don’t suppose you have any way to track down who is new to the town in the past year or so?”

“I have a few avenues I can go down to get that information.” He scratched his chin. “I think the local Welcome Wagon team might be a good place to start. I’d invite you to come along, but…”

“But you don’t want the office to know we’re working on this together.” I got that, even if it didn’t make me all that happy.

“It is what it is, Opal. And it’s only for a few more months. After that, we’ll be a proper team. And the town will just have to deal with it.”

I liked the sound of that. But still.

“You know you’re going to give me that list of names, right?”

He sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

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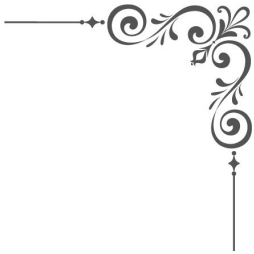

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Chapter 15

Orville might not be a witch, but he was a man of his word. I had the names within an hour.

Even though the more I thought about it, it might not do us all that much good. It's quite possible the girl was from right here in Wind's Crossing and only just this year confronted the man. It's also possible that the girl was simply passing through. But it was a place to start, and I wasn't about to leave any stone unturned on this.

The shop was still going like mad, though, and I was trying to make it up to Kimberly for taking the time off this morning to meet with Orville. I really didn't want to ditch her again so soon after that.

So the two of us double-teamed the customers and when lunch hour finally came around, I asked Kimberly if I could borrow baby Pearl. For what it was worth, Kimberly was getting pretty darn good at the Ravenswind look.

"Do I get to ask why?"

"Sure. I'm visiting a new witch in town, and I thought baby Pearl might help break the ice."

One of the names on Orville's list had immediately jumped out at me. Patience Goodheart. With a last name like that, I was betting she wasn't the one we were looking for. But then again, she could have married into it. Either way, having a baby along for the call just seemed like a good thing. Witches, for the most part, loved babies. And no, I'm not taking eating them, either. Hansel and Gretel gave us witches a terrible reputation. A mostly untrue one, too. I mean, sure, there were always rotten apples in any barrel.

She blinked at me. "If you think I'm going to balk at having the shop all to myself for an hour, you've got another thing coming. Go for it."

I didn't have to be told twice. I strapped baby Pearl's harness to my chest—I was going to hate it when she got too big for this thing—and we headed out. It was a beautiful spring day, so we hoofed it the three blocks to Patience's house.

I'd met the witch once or twice over the course of the last year. The last time being when she came to me for spell ingredients and advice on which plants grew best in the area. By now, her witch's garden should have a good start. That seemed like a good reason for a

nice, friendly visit to me.

She opened the door and smiled when she saw me standing there. It was a pleasant change from the normal. Kind of made me feel guilty for not visiting sooner. But then, my family had been rather busy this past year.

Of course, her attention didn't stay on me for long. Her eyes were immediately drawn to baby Pearl. As I'd known within reason that they would be.

"What an adorable baby girl!" Then she stepped back. "Please, won't the two of you come in?"

I stepped across her threshold and immediately felt at peace with the world. I didn't know what kind of cleansing spell she used, but I truly hoped she would be willing to share. Once I got to know her a bit better, of course. One didn't ask a witch to share spells with you until you got to know them. And them you.

With baby Pearl strapped onto my chest, I could feel rather than see her little head turning back and forth, taking everything in. She was a baby. She could get by with that. If I did it, it would be rude. Even though I really, really wanted to.

Patience's house was just that special. At least her front room was. I was betting the rest of the home would be the same.

"I love your home. This couldn't have been easy to do."

She laughed. "It wasn't." Then she turned to look at the room with pride. Well-founded pride. The room would have been considered the very height of witchy fashion—about two hundred years ago. "But if you love this look, I'm afraid the rest of the house would be rather a disappointment to you." She shrugged. "I meet clients here, and they seem to expect all this."

It took her saying that for my eyes to light on the small round table in the corner. The table itself wasn't anything special, but I was guessing that the slightly glowing crystal ball at its center was another matter altogether.

"You're a seer?" I was prepared to be either highly impressed or highly let down. Seers were rare, indeed. But charlatans were not. I was hoping she wasn't the latter.

Patience ducked her head for a moment. "At the Goddess's will, yes. Not, unfortunately, all the times I would wish for it." She paused. "And some of the times I would not."

I got that. I had always been rather happy the seer gene had skipped my family. It wasn't nearly as fun as everyone imagined it would be. In fact, it could be quite the opposite.

"For the times the sight fails me, I use Tarot cards. I have quite an extensive collection of decks." She shrugged. "I pull the one I think is best suited to the individual client. They seem to like that. Not that

any of my decks wouldn't do the job just the same."

Truth. The picture on the cards wasn't what mattered at all. It was the meaning behind the image that mattered.

"Did you come for a reading?"

"No." I wavered. I liked Patience and suddenly pretending to be there for any reason other than the one I was there for just seemed... wrong. And yes, a part of me wondered if that feeling didn't have something to do with that cleansing spell. Or another one protecting the house. Either way, it worked. "I actually came to ask you if you knew Reverend Castle."

She arched an eyebrow and laughed. "Oh yes. Quite well, actually." She led me through a heavily beaded doorway and into a much more modernly furnished kitchen. She motioned to the table. "Have a seat. I'm guessing you're on lunch. I have some freshly made tuna salad. Would you care to join me for a sandwich?"

"That sounds heavenly. Thank you."

I watched as she pulled the salad out of the refrigerator and deftly made three sandwiches, then cut them all in half and put them on a plate. Pulling out a large bowl from a cabinet, she filled it with potato chips and then put both plate and bowl on the table.

"Help yourself."

I did. The woman knew how to make a good tuna salad. And a person could ask for a recipe much easier than a spell. So I did. I got it too.

Afterward, as we sat and munched, she finally looked over at me. "What did you want to know about the good reverend? I didn't kill him if that's what you wanted to know. Had no reason to. Our business was in the past."

I swallowed heavily and took a deep swig of the lemonade she'd poured me. "How far in the past?"

Patience smiled at me. "About twenty-five years or so, I'd say. That's how old my daughter is, you know." She winked at me.

I swallowed again. And again. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Unless you're really slow to get things, yes. And I don't think that's the case, by the way. You strike me as an all-together kind of witch. It takes a lot to impress me. You and your family do. That says something."

"Well, you're kind of impressive yourself, you know."

"Why, thank you. I try." She took a swig of her lemonade. "Reverend Castle wasn't a very faithful man to his wife, you know. I had no illusions of being his only affair." She barked out a laugh. "And it sure as the dickens wasn't no all-consuming passion thing on my part, either. Truth be told, I wanted a child. Not so much the

husband part that people tend to think should go with that."

"Does your daughter live in town too?"

She nodded and looked at me oddly. "She does. I moved back to Wind's Crossing almost a year ago. Beatrix followed me here a few months later. I believe you know her. The two of you have something strong in common, you know. A certain sheriff?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Trixie the dispatcher is your daughter?"

"She is. And not all that happy that you're taking the good sheriff off the singles market either. Beatrix had kind of hoped to be doing that herself." She wrinkled her nose. "Truth be told, I'm glad that didn't work out. No offense, but he's far too old for her."

"Agreed." But then a lot of younger women went for older guys too. What was the term they used? Sugar daddies. The thought of my Orville being anyone's sugar daddy was enough to make me smile. But that thought was for another time. Time to get things back on track. "You mentioned that Reverend Castle had other affairs. Any of them bear fruit too?"

Patience lifted a shoulder. "Who knows? A few of them were married women, as I recall. If they did have children by the man, who would know? I'm pretty sure they wouldn't come forward about it, now would they?"

"Most likely not. Especially seeing as how the reverend was married as well."

"Exactly. That man might have a few little darlings running around with his bloodline in their veins."

Not exactly a comforting thought, that. All that meant was that our suspect pool had just gotten larger.

Why couldn't anything be simple?

The rest of the lunch we just talked about other things, and yes, in the end, I got to see her witch's garden. I could see the two of us becoming friends. It would be nice to have another friend close by. Especially if said friend was a true seer. One of those could come in handy for Team Destiny. Kind of made me wonder if the Goddess's hand wasn't in all of this. In a good way, this time.

When we were done, she walked me and baby Pearl around the outside of the house and to the front porch. She glanced down at baby Pearl for a moment and then back up at me.

"Would you be willing to accept a gift for the baby witch?"

I took a deep breath. No one but me and Sapphire knew who and what baby Pearl was. Not yet, anyway. Or at least, that's what I had thought until now. And I couldn't very well dispute that fact, now could I? That bordered on denying my Goddess. Something I would never do.

“I don’t see the harm in that.”

She smiled at us and told us to wait for just a minute. Patience walked into the house and was back out again within seconds. Holding a baby-sized broom.

A well-crafted miniature witch’s broom if ever I saw one. Not that I had ever seen one up until now. But it wasn’t hard to recognize it for what it was.

Baby Pearl’s reaction was immediate and ecstatic.

“I’ll take it that means she likes it.” Patience laughed. “The soul in that one is a strong one. I have a feeling you’re going to have your hands full when her magic starts coming on.”

I thanked her for the kind, and extremely fitting, gift and left. What was there to say? It wasn’t like I could admit that baby Pearl’s magic was already blossoming. That was unheard of.

But then again, as a seer, Patience might very well know more about baby Pearl than I was comfortable with.

I’d just have to trust the Goddess on that one.

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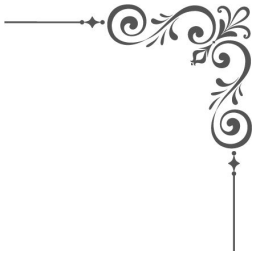

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Chapter 16

I'll fully admit that my little visit with Patience Goodheart had me more than a little distracted. Not that it was any kind of excuse for what happened next. It simply was a point of fact.

When I got back to the shop, we only had a few minutes before time to open the shop back up. Kimberly was in the front getting ready for the onslaught of our afternoon customers, and baby Pearl and I were in the back.

I put baby Pearl in her little playpen with her broom. That last part was because of her complete insistence. She flat out wasn't letting go of the darn thing without a total meltdown. So be it. What harm could it do?

Yeah. Wrong way to think on my part.

I turned my back for a split second to put down my purse and get ready to go help Kimberly, and when I turned back... baby Pearl was gone.

So was her broom.

Crapsnackles on steroids!

The curtain between the parts of the shop was still moving, and my heart fell. I raced through into the front shop just in time to see Kimberly turn to take in the sight of her baby flying on a tiny baby-sized broom and cackling wild enough to do any witch proud.

Needless to say, Kimberly went down like a ton of bricks. Luckily, she didn't hit anything on the way down. A bit of a miracle, that, what with how crowded my shop is.

I ran over to check on her. Once I saw that she was okay and just unconscious, I quickly wrote out a handwritten sign that the shop was closed for the afternoon due to a family emergency. Every word of that was absolutely true.

The very next thing I did? I took away the broom. Yes, caterwauling soon started. So be it. It's what I should have done to begin with. This wasn't the way I had planned to break the news about baby Pearl to Kimberly.

I locked the broom away in the closet. Otherwise, it would have been a wasted effort on my part to even take it away. Baby Pearl might be a baby, but she was for sure no lightweight when it came to magic.

Not every witch could ride a broom. In fact, most witches thought it was an impossibility. Which is why Mom had been bound and determined to prove it could be done. And the one magical feat she was probably most proud of in her lifetime.

Apparently, that was going to hold true for this lifetime as well.

Kimberly groaned, and I rushed to her side. Baby Pearl was back in her playpen and hopefully, without her ride, she'd stay there.

"What happened?" Then as her memory came back, her eyes widened, and she crab-walked away from me. Right up until her back was against the counter. "Pearl!"

I swallowed. No way around it this time. "Kimberly, we need to talk."

Her eyes darted around. "Where is my baby?"

"She's in her playpen, and I took away the broom. She's fine."

Her wild eyes were back on me. "She's not fine! She was riding a bloody broom!"

Well, yes, there was that.

I reached a hand down to her. "Come on, I think you'll rest easier if we have this conversation in the back with baby Pearl in plain sight."

It kind of worried me that she wouldn't take my hand. Her next words worried me even more.

"Up until now, I have had no issues with you or the whole witchcraft thing, Opal. But this crosses the line. I'll not have you casting spells on my children. I think we need to leave."

What? No.

"I didn't cast the spell, Kimberly. Baby Pearl did. She's a witch."

By now Kimberly was standing on her own. "That's impossible. Magic is in the bloodlines. You've told me that yourself. And Pearl's bloodline doesn't have an ounce of magic in it."

I almost had to trot to keep up with her as she moved to the back room. Her shoulders relaxed ever so slightly when she saw baby Pearl safe and sound. That didn't stop her from grabbing her up and clutching her tight.

Too tight, from baby Pearl's expression.

"Normally, that's true, yes. In fact, up until the moment baby Pearl was born, I'd have said that's just the way true magic worked. But in just this one case, the Goddess chose to make an exception." I hesitated. "She chose you as baby Pearl's mother, Kimberly. That's an honor and a blessing in and of itself. You're special."

"I'm not special. And I'm leaving. I'm sorry, Opal. I really do love you... but this is too much."

Other than by using magic or physical force, I couldn't very well stop her. Not that I didn't want to. But perhaps it was better to give

the woman some space to come to grips with everything. But there was one other thing she needed to know first. No sense in beating around the bush about it now.

"If you have to leave, I understand. But I hope you'll not make that a permanent thing. You're special, Kimberly, that's true. But baby Pearl? There is a reason the Goddess put my mother's soul into that baby. I might not know what that reason is, but She does, and I trust my Goddess."

Kimberly sputtered, but no words came out.

"You think it's an entire coincidence that you named your baby Pearl? The Goddess had her hand in that, you know. Had to have. And she threw us all together for a good reason too. You're going to need my help in raising that one, Kimberly. Maybe the help of my whole family. Most witches don't have access to their magic right off the bat. That doesn't seem to be the case with baby Pearl." I was fairly pleading with her by now. "You need me."

She just stared at me in disbelief. "You're insane. And all these months, I thought you meant it when you said we were a family. Whatever warped plans you have for Pearl end here."

And she walked out.

I had really messed things up this time. And I wasn't at all sure I could make them right again.

I JUST WASN'T UP TO opening the shop back up. Not in the cards. In fact, I was so depressed that I changed out the sign to 'Closed until further notice'. One less thing to worry about, anyway.

I spent the early afternoon catching up on paperwork and worrying. I'd have to go over the paperwork again once my brain stopped reeling, but I had to have something to do. When it was time to pick the kids up at school, I left.

When Nancy came out to the car, she was in a state. "Where's Mason? I couldn't find him, and his teacher said Kim took him out of class early. Is everything okay?"

I took a deep breath and waited until she was in the car before turning to meet her gaze. "Not really. Baby Pearl let the magical cat out of the bag today. Kimberly is not taking it well." To put it mildly.

"Oh." Nancy's face fell, and she turned to look out the window. "Are they still at the farmhouse?"

"We'll soon find out. I've been trying to give her some space."

Nancy nodded, then we both spent the rest of the short trip in silence. What was there left to say?

When we pulled in the drive, they were still there. But only just. Kimberly was putting the last box in the trunk of her car when we

arrived.

That wouldn't do at all.

Nancy and I got out, and Nancy ran over to Kimberly and threw her arms around her. "Please don't go, Kim. You need us... and we need you guys."

A quick glimpse at Mason showed that he didn't have a clue what was going on. The good thing was, he didn't seem to be too upset about it. That was something. I was beyond fond of that boy, too, for the record.

I walked up to her. "If your mind is set on leaving, at least take your van."

She shook her head, not looking at me. "I won't do that. The sheriff said it was mine, I know, but things are different now. I won't have it said I took advantage of you in any way."

I grunted. "Anyone says that, and I'll deal with them." Then I stepped a little closer and lowered my voice. "I'm guessing you're heading to Gray's trailer, and the roads are curvy and a bit tricky. The van is safer. Please take it. Whatever you might think of me right now, I love you all. And I want you safe. Always have and always will."

Her eyes met mine for a split second, then she nodded. Taking a risk on her life was one thing. Taking a risk on the lives of her children was another altogether. "Fine. But you tell the sheriff I'll be coming up with a way to pay him back."

That didn't sound good. That sounded like this was a more permanent move than what I'd hoped for. Hopefully, I'd be able to change her mind over time. The thought of baby Pearl being without a witch to guide her right now was more than slightly terrifying.

I knew what that child was capable of. Kimberly and Gray didn't.

We transferred all the boxes and bags over to the van in silence. Well, except for the sounds of Nancy and Mason's crying. Mason had been okay with it... up until he found out that Nancy wasn't. Then the waterworks had started.

It was all I could to not to join them.

My phone rang just as the van was pulling out of the drive and onto the road. I glanced at it. I wasn't really in the mood for conversation right now. But it was Amie. You always took calls from family. It was just too risky not to.

"Yes, Amie?"

"Hey, Opal. I went through those video files and even managed to dig up one that the sheriff's deputy missed. Hit the jackpot on that one too. It shows two people in the area around the time of death. But I don't know either of them. I blew up the footage and sent it to you by email. You should have it now."

I nodded distractedly. "Thank you. I'll have a look."

“Is everything okay?”

What could I say to that? “We’re going through a bit of a rough spot right now, but the Goddess will put things right soon enough.” I was praying with all my heart that I was speaking nothing but the truth.

“Anything me and Ruby can do to help Her along?”

“Not really, I’m afraid.”

“Well, let us know if that changes. The flowers are coming along really nicely, by the way. And Sapphire is pretty sure she has a handle on the cake now. How are the dresses coming?”

Oh yes. The dresses. “They’ll be ready.”

There was a brief moment of pure silence.

“You haven’t even started them, have you?”

“I have not. But that changes tonight.”

We said our goodbyes, and I looked down at Nancy. She was looking at the house with wet eyes.

“It isn’t going to be the same without them.”

“No, it isn’t. And I’m hoping that we can change Kimberly’s mind about this. But for now, we have to respect her wishes and give her time to adjust to the reality of things.” I was pretty sure that baby Pearl would take care of that for us.

I just didn’t know how long that would take. Or what Kimberly’s reaction to that reality would be.

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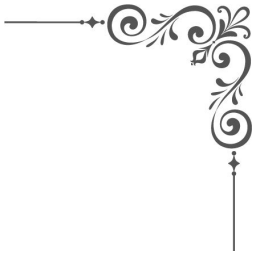

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Chapter 17

I did try to work on the dresses. I truly did.

Neither Nancy nor I really wanted to walk into that now empty house, so we decided to make the drive into Oak Hill. They had a fabric shop there. That was something that Wind's Crossing was sorely missing. Not that our small population would support such a store.

I made a quick call, and we picked up Sapphire on the way. Nancy and I agreed to stay quiet on what was happening on the home front for now. Should have known better than that. My sister had both of us spilling our guts within minutes.

Surprisingly, she laughed. Not exactly the reaction I had expected from her. It sure as shooting wasn't the reaction I was personally experiencing at the moment.

"It'll sort out, trust me." She glanced over at me, her eyes shining with mirth. "You are totally underestimating Mom, you know. Can you ever recall a single time when that woman didn't get her way on something?"

Well, when she put it that way. No. No, I couldn't. Mom had a way of getting us to do exactly what she wanted us to do and making us think it was our idea to do. She was a master.

"But she's a baby."

Sapphire raised an eyebrow at me. "And you really think that's going to change things?"

Again, now that she put it that way... no. Probably not when I thought about it. An unhappy baby was kind of hard to deal with. But then, I knew Kimberly far better than Sapphire did too. She was a stubborn woman who put her kids first and foremost. She'd weather through a lot if she truly thought it was for the best of baby Pearl.

Which is one of the reasons the Goddess had seen fit to make her baby Pearl's mom in this lifetime. In other words, Mom just might have met her match.

Still, Sapphire's words did make me feel a little bit better, and Nancy seemed to take her cue from us too. We visited the fabric shop and bought yards upon yards of soft, satiny pink material.

And no, Mom's dress wasn't white. She'd always said that white just wouldn't do for a witch. We weren't exactly known for our chastity. Kind of the opposite, actually. Not that us Ravenswinds were

nearly as wild as the townsfolk believed we were. Not by half.

But we couldn't exactly deny that we had children out of wedlock, now could we? That fact kind of spoke for itself. So yeah, bottom line, Mom's light blushing pink wedding dress was perfect for us.

We matched the color as best we could. I was planning to do a wide band of offsetting white at the waistband of each dress anyway. That would help minimize any obvious color differences.

After our shopping trip, we dropped Sapphire off and headed home.

"You think Sapphire is right? Will Kimberly and the kids really come back?"

I glanced over at her. The girl deserved an honest answer. "I don't know. But she is right about Mom. I know you never got to meet her, but she is a force to be reckoned with when she wants something,"

Nancy nodded, but she was still looking out the window. "So is Kimberly."

Yeah. That's what still had me worried.

IN THE END, I DIDN'T get a whole lot done on the dresses. I might have felt a tiny bit better about the situation, but not nearly better enough to concentrate on something as delicate as sewing two wedding dresses.

Or cutting them out, either. I didn't want to risk ruining the fabric by a wrong cut. So, instead, Orville came over, and we had a nice little small family movie night.

When Nancy finally headed up to finish up her homework before bed—normally that was done right after school, but nothing was normal about this day—I finally turned to Orville. I needed another distraction. Movies just weren't cutting it for me.

"Tell me about Kenny Driscoll. Any idea who killed him?"

Orville shook his head. "No. But there is a weird thing about it. Whoever killed him tried to make it look like a robbery gone wrong."

"Tried to? I'm guessing that means they failed?"

He looked at me. "I'd say so, yes. Kenny had a small lockbox of 'collateral' for people placing overly large bets. It wasn't touched. I mean, it isn't like it was secured or anything. It was just sitting there. And the whole thing wasn't all that heavy, either. Couldn't have weighed over fifty pounds total. If it was a thief, I just can't see them leaving that behind."

"Kind of sounds like the very thing a burglar would be looking for to me."

"Exactly. All they took was cash that Kenny kept in the counter drawer, his watch, his phone, and his laptop. Not exactly enough

worth killing someone over."

"Sure wouldn't seem like it. But I'm guessing that there's another reason you don't believe what they're trying to sell you."

He smiled at me, and the arm around my shoulders squeezed just a bit. "We're going to make such a great team, you and I."

"Well, duh." Isn't that what kids today say to someone who says something that's already a well-established fact?

"If I'm right, the same person that killed Reverend Castle killed Kenny Driscoll. I just can't figure out what tied the two killings together."

"Betting?"

Orville scrubbed at his face. "I don't really see that fitting in here. Kenny was the one that took bets and paid them out. If Castle welshed on a bet through Kenny, it wouldn't affect the person or people that he was betting against. In all likelihood, they wouldn't even have known it was him. It's not like Kenny posted that information anywhere."

"So what else tied the two men together?"

"That's just it. Nothing that I'm finding. And believe me, I've looked. And looked again. Kenny wasn't exactly a church-going man, so he wasn't a member of the church. They were far enough apart age-wise that they hadn't gone to school together. And Kenny wasn't exactly a man to volunteer for community services either. So their paths only ever crossed at that betting shop of his." He threw me a quick glance. "It's a conundrum."

I just looked at him. Orville must still be on that word of the day kick. "Feel proud of yourself?"

He grinned at me. "A little. I managed to use today's word several times. Pretty easy in my line of work."

It would be.

Even with the household of only three, and no super young kids in the house, Orville still refused to spend the night. Too bad, too. I really could have used the companionship.

I still felt like I'd really messed things up with Kimberly. I was hoping little baby Pearl could mend the fences, but that was quite the task to give to a not quite yet seven-month-old baby.

Still, if anyone would be up to it, it would be her.

After walking Orville out to his car, and a great goodnight kiss that made me wish even stronger that he was staying over, I made my way to my little apartment. I stared at the satiny fabric for a few minutes, but nope. I just didn't have it in me tonight. If the shop was going to be closed for a few days, I'd make up for lost time then.

That was my plan anyway.

I fed Bridget her midnight snack and spent a long while trying to

console her. I was upset about Kimberly leaving. Bridget? She was inconsolable. I guess to her, it kind of felt like losing Mom all over again.

In a way, it did to me too. I just hoped it wasn't a permanent loss.

In my defense, the day had been a long one, and a lot had happened. I think that in itself was a good reason to have forgotten such an important thing as Amie's earlier call.

However, that wasn't a mistake I was likely to repeat.

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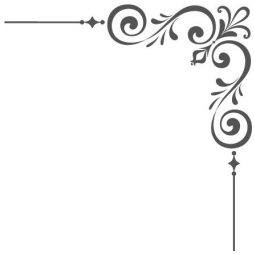

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Chapter 18

I ended up sleeping on my sofa. Bridget kind of demanded it. And yes, when I say kind of, what I really meant was that she insisted. If I was going to get any sleep at all that night, it was going to happen on that blasted sofa. Not my nice, comfortable bed.

Not that my sofa was uncomfortable. It wasn't. As much as I was into antiques and the look of things, when it came to my personal furniture? I wanted all the comfort I could get. I'm not sure that it's a witch thing, but it is sure as heck an Opal Ravenswind thing.

The next morning, Nancy and I ate our cereal and toast for breakfast, and then I drove her to school. I checked in on the shop, but everything seemed okay. Besides, my amulet should warn me if that happened to not be the case. So, I went home intending to settle down to work on those dresses. They wouldn't be the matter of an afternoon's sewing, and I was quickly running out of time.

After all, I couldn't very well wallow in my grief for long. That wasn't how Mom had raised me. Take what life hands you and deal with it. Try as hard as you can to make it better, but once you've done what you could do, let it go to the Goddess.

That was Mom's entire philosophy of life in a nutshell. Couldn't fault her for it, either. It made sense to me.

My plans for a day sewing, however, were kind of interrupted when I got back home to find a motorcycle in my front yard. A motorcycle I knew very well, I might add.

A wild-haired Gray was standing beside it. He walked over as I parked the car. When I glanced up at him, I almost did a double-take. The man did not look good. And if his hair was wild, which I gave the motorcycle credit for, his eyes were even wilder. He rather looked like a man possessed.

At the very least, he looked like a man that hadn't had a wink of sleep in the past twenty-four-hour period or more. Probably quite a bit more.

It wasn't very charitable of me, but I'll admit the look of him made me happy. Cheered me right up again. Baby Pearl must be doing her job very well, indeed.

"Can we talk?"

I nodded, then led the way into the house. Once we were settled, I

stared into his eyes. Before he started, I had a question.

"How is everyone holding up? Is Kimberly okay?"

He took a staggered breath. "She's... stressed. Her, Mason, and... Pearl, are all back at the trailer."

I arched an eyebrow. "Shouldn't Mason be in school?"

"He should. But Kimberly is making an exception for today."

Hiding my smile was getting harder. I had a funny feeling that no one in that tiny trailer got much sleep last night.

"So, talk already."

Gray swallowed. "Is Pearl really... your mom?"

I thought about that for a minute. "Baby Pearl is baby Pearl. Through and through. If you and Kimberly think she's possessed or something, well, you're flat out wrong. We don't do that kind of thing. Even thinking about doing something like that could cost a witch her magic. Not something a single one of us would ever risk."

"That doesn't answer my question."

I chewed on my cheek for a few seconds. "You've heard of reincarnation, right? It's kind of like that." Or maybe it was exactly like that. I hadn't ever really researched the idea of past lives. Up until baby Pearl had looked at me with those big baby blues of hers, I hadn't ever really believed in the concept. Now I did.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that baby Pearl was born with my mother's soul. And, from what I've seen out of her, she knows who she is too. I don't think that's normal. Which means the Goddess made an exception in her case and let her keep her memories. At least some of them." Like how to fly a broom, for instance.

"And what does that mean?"

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine on that one, I'm afraid. The Goddess hasn't discussed her plans and reasoning with me on this. I just know what is."

He swallowed again. "Okay." He drew out the word for all it was worth. "Then I guess my next question is... how long have you known? Did you know before she was born?"

Sitting up a little straighter, I let my eyes bore straight into his. "If you're asking what I think you're asking, the answer is no. I didn't befriend Kimberly and her family because of the baby she was carrying. I didn't have a single iota of a clue that she was carrying around a child with my mother's soul. Kimberly and Mason were already family to me before I found that out."

"And when, exactly, did you find out?"

I hesitated. "Baby Pearl was born at ten o'clock on All Hallows Eve. I'd say I knew right around ten o'five."

Gray nodded. "I see." He shifted in the chair. "Right now, Kimberly

is hurting, but I was having a hard time putting everything together. I think I have a better picture now."

"You think you can help Kimberly through this? I wasn't kidding when I told her that she needed me."

He barked out a laugh. "Oh, believe me, we need you. It might take her a day or two to come to that realization, though. Kimberly can be a bit..."

"I believe the word you are searching for is stubborn."

"That would be one word for it, yes. And if it concerns her kids, I can't dissuade her, you know. This has to be her decision."

"Agreed." I was quiet for a minute. "And as long as we're putting all of our cards on the table, I should tell you that I know what you are."

His swallow was even bigger this time. "I kind of thought you might. It was a risk I had to take to save Tory. I'd do it again, too, if I had to."

"Of course you would. Any decent human... or wolf... would." I wanted to make it very plain that I wasn't just whistling Dixie. I really knew he was a werewolf.

"You seem to be handling that knowledge very well. I'm going to assume you've known that we exist for a time now. I'd be interested in knowing how."

"Do you know Patricia Bluespring?"

He nodded slowly. "I see."

"It wasn't her choice to rat out the whole werewolf thing, just so you know. But it was kind of a life or death situation. She chose life, and I'm glad my family was in a position to help her."

"I'm glad too. Patty's an odd duck, but then aren't we all?"

He stood. I'm guessing in preparation to leave. But I wasn't quite ready for that yet. I had something else up my sleeve. Luckily, it was something that I had already gotten Orville's blessings on.

"Can I ask you a point-blank question?"

Gray looked at me for a minute before answering. "Well, it's not like we have many secrets from each other, now is it? So sure, go ahead."

"What are your intentions toward Kimberly?"

His head jerked back. Must not have been the question he'd been expecting. "I'd like to marry her."

"And her kids?"

Another swallow. That Adam's apple of his was getting quite the workout today. "I want to be a family. I've been alone for a long time. With Kimberly and her brood... I'm not. I'm home." He hesitated. "But at the same time, my tiny little travel trailer is kind of busting at the seams right now."

I smiled at him. “Pretty small quarters even for a man living alone. Let alone adding an entire family into the mix.”

“Yeah.”

I stood too, but instead of walking toward the door I jerked my head toward the stairs. “Come upstairs, if you have a minute. There’s something I want to show you.”

He followed me up the stairs and into baby Pearl’s room. My heart about broke all over again seeing that empty crib. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be empty much longer.

I reached up and pulled the rope to bring down the attic steps. Then I motioned for him to go up. I never felt right climbing steps with someone at my back. He gave me an odd look, but he did. Showed a lot of trust, that.

Once we were both in the attic, he just looked at me. “So, what did you want to show me?”

I motioned around us. “This.”

My attic wasn’t some fancy ordeal like Sapphire’s was in her new mansion. It was just one long, somewhat square open space. But it had a nice, if old, wooden floor and plastered walls. The ceiling still showed the beams of the roof, but that could be remedied in time if need be.

“If you truly want to be a family with Kimberly and her kids, then you all are going to need a much bigger space. I have space right here. I was thinking, if the dust settles to the point of Kimberly and her kids moving back in, we could always move you in up here.” I looked around at the massive, open space. Other than a few odds and ends, the space was by and large unused.

He looked around him and then back at me. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Never been more serious in my life. Raising baby Pearl will not be a simple task. The fact that you know the score now and still aren’t running for the hills means a lot to me. Means you just might be a keeper. She’s gonna want you around, and rightly so.”

Gray walked from one end of the attic to the other. “There is so much space.” He looked out one of the end windows down into the backyard. “I do wish it had its own entrance, though. I keep pretty weird hours as a barkeep.”

There was that. “Well, there is an outside staircase leading to the second-floor balcony, and we could always keep baby Pearl’s door open and the attic steps down for you. Then, if all this works out as well as I think it might, we could talk about extending that staircase and creating an entrance up here too. Not something I’d want to rush into until we give it a try, though.”

He turned to look at me. “How do you think Orville would feel

about that?"

I grunted. "He's the first one that brought up that you might need to move in here." I hesitated. This was really my first option. I wanted to be around baby Pearl, too, at least until I was absolutely sure the two of them had a good handle on things. But if all else failed, I also wanted them safe and comfortable. "He did mention that if you living here didn't work out, there would always be his house in Wind's Crossing. I'm kind of hoping to save that option until baby Pearl is a lot older, truthfully."

And even then, it would most likely be Orville and I moving. Not Gray and Kimberly.

The farmhouse needed a family. I was pretty sure we could work out some kind of agreement for access to that blessed hilltop out back.

Gray nodded slowly. "I can't promise anything, but I'll talk to Kimberly… when she calms down a bit. Might be a few days." He didn't look too thrilled at that prospect.

There wasn't much more to say at that point. From here out, things kind of rested with Kimberly. I walked Gray out to his motorcycle.

"Thank you for coming to me."

He just looked at me and shook his head. "I'm the one who should be thanking you. For taking care of Kim and the kids, for bringing us together…" His eyes went up to the top part of the house. "Everything. Thank you."

"It's what family does."

Gray smiled and nodded. "That it is, Godmother."

I watched him ride down the drive and out onto the road. He was a good man, that one. Although, I was a touch worried about how Kimberly might take the whole werewolf thing. Especially seeing how she took the whole her baby is a powerful witch thing.

Then again, she was a strong woman. Once the shock of things wore off, I was pretty sure she'd come around.

Besides, I kind of had my money riding on baby Pearl. I think Sapphire was right. Judging by Gray, baby Pearl just might win this one.

Maybe I was a betting woman, after all.

And just as if my thought brought it on, my phone rang. It was Orville.

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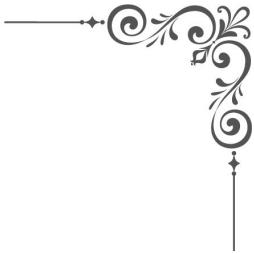

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Chapter 19

"I wanted you to be the first to know," he said when I picked up. "We have made an arrest in Reverend Castle's case. And it doesn't have a thing to do with our wedding, either."

Well, that was good news. "Who did you arrest?"

"Actually, I can't take the credit for this one. It was a deputy of mine. And, believe it or not, my dispatcher."

As if calling her his dispatcher did any good. He might as well say her name, but then he tried not to in my hearing. Something about that Trixie really got under my skin. Especially once she had started making moves on my man. Not that the moves had gotten her anywhere, but still.

"Oh?" Even I could hear the ice in my tone. "I'm still waiting, you know."

"Sorry. I'm afraid you aren't going to like the answer. I know I sure didn't. They arrested Blake Mallard. Sam's dad."

"What the..." I took a deep breath. "I hope they had a very good reason for doing so."

"They did. According to... okay, Trixie... according to Trixie, she'd been hearing rumors that Reverend Castle was dead sure that Sam was his child. And, per the rumor mill, Castle was thinking about making a claim. She and Alphie, who I guess she's dating now, by the way, went to have a talk with him. They took a glance in his car before going in and saw a heavy-duty flashlight with what looked suspiciously like blood on the handle."

"Just lying there in plain view, was it?" That didn't sound right. Mallard had struck me as a man who would do whatever it took to protect his family, yes. But he also hadn't struck me as a man who was stupid. If he'd gone to this extreme, which I had to say I highly doubted, I just couldn't see him leaving the weapon out in plain sight.

"I'll admit, that part bothers me too. And of course, Blake denies it all. But it was blood, Opal, and the handle of that flashlight matches up pretty darn well to both head wounds on our victims."

"And what could the man possibly have against Kenny Driscoll?"

"Don't know the answer to that yet. This all just happened in, like, the last half hour. I just wanted you to know."

"Well, thanks for that." I hesitated. "I have to ask. Was the car

locked?"

He grunted. "Yeah, that was my first question too. It was. So it isn't likely that the flashlight was planted. Not too many people know how to break into a car without leaving a single sign of the entry."

"You did, last year when Ruby locked the keys in my car."

"Ah, so you heard about that, huh?"

"I did."

"Well, okay, so few people other than car thieves, locksmiths, and lawmen know how to break into a car. Happy?"

Not really. I still had my doubts as to Mallard's guilt.

"Make sure you're in on the questioning, okay?"

"Already planning on it. Which, by the way, I need to get to. See you tonight, Opal."

I stared at my phone for a minute after he hung up. This didn't feel right. Not at all. Something was very, very wrong with this picture.

Okay, I could see Mallard getting desperate if he thought Castle had a chance of taking baby Sam. But surely the man didn't have a prayer's chance of actually doing that. And wouldn't he have to produce some kind of proof in order to get a paternity test to prove it? That wouldn't have gone over well with his congregation. Especially if he forced Cassidy's hand, and she offered her side of the story.

Nope. Not a lick of sense to any of this.

I walked in and plopped down on my sofa to have a hard think on things. Even if Mallard had done dirty old Reverend Castle in, what would have been his motivation for killing Driscoll? Come to think of it, what on earth could possibly have motivated anyone to do that second murder?

Unless... he knew too much. So what did he know? Well, he knew about that girl showing up on Castle's doorstep claiming he was her father. That was something. But how would anyone know he knew that? Unless he told more than me about that story. And, as there weren't any names involved in the telling, I just didn't see how the man posed a threat to them.

Unless they thought he knew and just wasn't saying? Too many 'unlesses' in there to make sense of things.

And that right there was when I remembered Amie's call. What was it she had said? There were two people in the area at the time Castle went to meet his maker?

What if...

I grabbed my laptop and booted it up to check my email. The videos were right there, just as she'd promised.

The view was a little blurry, but the picture was clear enough to just make out the person walking toward the church. Kenny Driscoll. The camera was facing him, so his face, slightly blurry though it was,

was front and center. We weren't so lucky with the second person. They were headed the other way. Away from the camera. That meant their face was away from the camera.

Or at least it was until they turned to stare after Driscoll.

My sheriff had the totally wrong person in his holding cell. And the right person had helped put him there.

Trixie.

MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS to call Orville. He had to know, and he had to know now. Unfortunately, he didn't answer his cell phone. And when I called the station, I was told that he was in an interrogation room and couldn't be bothered right now. Then they hung up on me.

And no, it wasn't Trixie. I guess Orville was right. She wasn't the only one there that didn't care much for me right now.

Well, there was only one thing for it. If I couldn't talk to the man over the phone, then I'd just have to go there in person. I grabbed my laptop and my purse and headed for the car.

I didn't make it any further than that. Lucky for me, and possibly the person under my car, I saw the boots sticking out before I got in and started the engine. Otherwise, we both probably would have met the Goddess today.

When I caught a glimpse of the boots, I backtracked. Hard. But she must have been paying attention. And she was younger and far faster than I was. She rolled out from under the vehicle and took me down in a flying tackle as I went up the porch steps. If I survived this, which was in no way guaranteed, I'd be covered in bruises tomorrow.

Trixie was no lightweight. And even if she was working as a dispatcher now, she had graduated from the academy. She knew how to take a person down. Knew how to keep them down too.

I wasn't going anywhere. And as she was holding both my arms up over my head, I wasn't in the position to do any magic either. I kind of needed my hands for that. She must have done her research.

That's when I realized just how stupid I'd been. Trixie hadn't had to do any research at all. Her mother was a powerful witch in her own right. And a seer to boot. If Trixie showed up here at my doorstep, then I was guessing that just maybe she had inherited that very special gene.

The problem with that was that it took a very special witch to handle that very special gene. All the others? It drove coco for cocoa nuts. From the look in Trixie's eyes as she stared down at me, she was one of the latter.

Too bad for me.

"I kind of figured it'd be you that figured it all out, and I was right.

Imagine my consternation when I got the vision, just when everything was lining up so darned perfectly. If you'd only stayed out of this like the sheriff asked, you'd have never seen this coming."

I swallowed. "You planned on killing me all along, didn't you?"

She laughed. Oh yes, the girl was definitely loco. "Of course. I don't much care what the future tells me. You aren't the right match for Orville, witch. He belongs with me. End of story."

Even as she was glancing around her, most likely trying to figure out the best way to end me, my mind was going strong. What life-saving spell could I cast without my hands? The answer, sadly, was none. Any spell, regardless of hands, would require words. I highly doubted I'd much more than open my mouth to start the necessary chant before my life would end. One way or another.

"He'll know it was you, you know. Orville is a smart man. He'll figure it out."

That got me another wild laugh. "Even if he does, it'll be too late for you."

My cellphone rang in my bag. Not that I could very well answer it. But the ringtone told me all I wanted to know. It was Orville.

Too bad I wasn't going to get to say goodbye.

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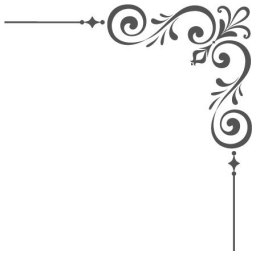

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Chapter 20

Trixie gave my bag a violent kick with her foot, which sent it flying. Really wished I'd had a brick in the darn thing like Orville accused me of every now and again. But no. After a few seconds, the ringing stopped.

She glanced behind her and seemed to make up her mind. "We're too open out here. Time to take this inside."

As a simple dispatcher, she didn't have standard-issue handcuffs. But that wouldn't stop someone like her. Holding my wrists in one bear-clawed hand of a grip, she reached into her back pocket and came out with a zip tie.

Looking me straight in the eye, she said, "This can go two ways. You can let me put this on you without a fight. Or I can get off you, and while you try to run, I can pull my taser in like a half a second and send a lot of volts through your system. Your choice."

Not much of a choice to my mind. I'd seen Amie's taser at work. The zap it delivered wasn't a pretty sight. Electricity is a mighty powerful thing. And not meant to be sent through a human's body.

Part of me wanted to wait until she tried to put on the zip tie and then fight her for all I was worth. If she'd just give me a couple of seconds, I could hit her with a spell to stop this madness. But that wasn't really in the cards, was it? She knew witches, and she knew what we were capable of. I wouldn't be getting a single second.

As I said, not much of a choice. But if I was lying on the ground, writhing in pain, then she could do pretty much as she pleased with me. I didn't like that idea at all. I allowed her to put on the zip ties.

That done, she jerked me to my feet and shoved me up the short steps. "Inside, witch."

I glanced at her first. I wanted to know what I was dealing with. The first thing I noticed was that she didn't have a gun. A taser, yes, but no firearm. That was something. At least, that's what I told myself, anyway.

My saving grace just might be that she was underestimating me. If I'd been her in the present situation, I'd have zapped me right off the bat. Then I'd have done what I came to do and got the bloody heck out. Good thing she wasn't me, wasn't it?

Because I knew a few things she didn't. One of which was that my

house was warded seven ways to Sunday. Thanks mostly to Sapphire's new husband, Archimedes Mineheart. Come to find out, Earth witches were pretty good witches to have on your side after all.

The door opened, and she pushed me over the threshold, as I'd expected her to. I knew what would happen next. But apparently her vision hadn't warned her. Thank you, Goddess, for having my back on that one.

I dropped to the floor and rolled to the side to get behind the door. That was important for the next part of things. I needed something substantial between the two of us. Like a solid wooden door.

Because when Trixie went to step over the threshold, she was stopped. Dead cold. My house wasn't about to let someone in that had murder on their mind.

While she was still struggling, trying to get through the ward, I kicked the door shut. Hard. With my hands zip-tied, it sure as heck wasn't easy to get the latch to work, but I managed it. Right before she tried to turn the knob. A little too close for comfort.

She might not be able to get in, but I wasn't at all sure that the wards would be very effective at stopping a taser lead. And I sure as shooting didn't want to find out, either.

Darting into my little apartment, I grabbed my small witch's blade and cut the ties. Not a simple task, that. Even as I worked at getting my hands free, I started the spell.

I'd almost finished it, too, by the time I heard the sirens coming down the road. I ran to the window and looked out.

Furious and totally ticked off, Trixie was running. I was betting that she'd left her vehicle by the road so I wouldn't hear it on my gravel drive. She might have been able to make it to her car and be gone before Orville showed up. And yes, I was that sure it was him behind that siren.

Too bad for her, my spell finished. I had to use a little extra juice from our power crystals because I didn't want to risk her tasering my man. By the time Orville slapped the cuffs on her, she wasn't in any shape to fight.

Oh, she'd survive. But, like me, she'd be sore as all get out tomorrow.

Now that the worst of the danger was over, I started to feel the pain. I'd be needing to go to the hospital or my sister Sapphire when this was all done. Never the less, it was going to take more than a little pain to stop me from going out to meet Orville.

But I had to grab my walking stick on the way.

When he heard the front door open, he glanced back at me. He looked greatly relieved at the sight of me. At least until he noticed the walking stick.

Let's just say he was none too gentle getting Trixie into the backseat of his squad car. Not exactly police brutality, but not the care he normally took, either.

I got that. Especially since she had started to come to her senses by then. And she wasn't going in easily.

But go in she did. And minus her little taser, too.

"You searched her to make sure she doesn't have any other weapons on her, right?" I didn't like the thought of him driving down the road and having her shoot him in the back. Just because I hadn't seen a gun didn't mean she didn't have one. Some handguns were downright tiny.

They'd still kill a man at point-blank range, though.

Orville stopped and looked at me. "How long have I been Sheriff?"

I smiled at him. "Sorry. I'll take that as a yes." By that time, I'd reached him. Finally. The next couple of minutes were filled with just gentle warmth and gratitude. And a nice, close hug.

"How did you figure out it was Trixie?" I asked.

He kissed the top of my head before letting me go. "Let's just say we owe Amie a steak dinner. She called me and said that she'd sent the files to you, but that she hadn't heard from you. So she wanted to send them to me to look at too." He shook his head. "She said her witch's intuition told her it was important."

Witch's intuition, Goddess, or a Goddess-ridden kitten named Destiny. One of them, for sure. Wish they'd told me an hour or so earlier than they had. Could have saved me from having to limp down that aisle.

I didn't see my ankle being one hundred percent by then.

But then again, Sapphire was good. And she wanted a perfect wedding.

Two things in my favor right there.

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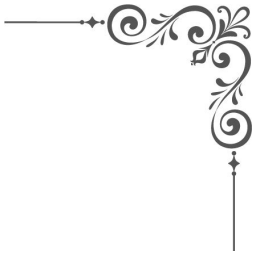

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Chapter 21

I didn't step foot in the farmhouse again that day. Orville couldn't take the rest of the day off to tend to me. Not after arresting a team member for a double count of murder and one count of... well, aggravated assault, I was guessing. I was kind of thinking that charge would be upgraded once they got around to checking out my car.

Driving it that first time was going to be nerve-wracking, to say the least. Most likely, though, knowing Orville, he'd insist on taking the first spin in it. But if he thought he'd be going alone, the man didn't know me as well as he thought he did.

Sapphire met me at the station and took me to her house. She declared my bones fit and unscathed, but I did end up with a nasty sprained ankle and a whole lot of bruises. Hopefully, they'd all be healed and gone before my wedding night. But even with Sapphire's powerful healing magic, it would be a couple of weeks at best before I'd be walking without my walking stick.

What walking Orville and her would allow me to do, of course. Which wasn't much. Sprains heal better with rest. Or so the two of them kept telling me.

Fine by me. Sewing didn't require me to stand, and that's where my focus needed to be right now, anyway.

A quick phone call and Nancy was back on the school bus route, at least temporarily. She didn't complain. The girl was a champ. I kind of thought there was a secret crush involved with a boy on that route. I was hoping eventually she'd confide in me.

The shop was going to stay closed until things mended with Kimberly. And I wasn't really sure how long that was going to take.

Come to find out... not all that long.

When Sapphire pulled into my drive Friday morning to deliver me back home, Kimberly's van was parked out front.

I didn't let my hopes get up, though. It was entirely possible she was just back to grab a few more things.

Yeah, right. My hopes were soaring as I walked through that front door. I just hoped they didn't come crashing back down in short order.

Sapphire saw me in the front door and onto the sofa, then she left. Before Kimberly even made it downstairs. This was one of those two's company and three's a crowd situations.

I was sipping a cool iced tea when Kimberly finally came down. My heart fell when I noticed a distinct absence of a baby.

She stood at the foot of the stairs and stared at me for a minute. I stared back. This was her show, not mine.

"I heard what happened yesterday. Are you okay?"

I lifted my foot slightly and motioned to it. "That took the brunt of it, but there are bruises under these clothes too. Bottom line, I'll live."

"I'm glad." She hesitated. "And I mean that, too. I've been a bit of a fool, haven't I? Accusing you of all kinds of horrible things. I shouldn't have done that."

I scratched my cheek and shook my head. "Well, to give you full credit here, you had just seen your baby—who can barely sit up by herself now—riding on a broom. I think you need to give yourself a pass on that one." I know I did.

Kimberly swallowed. "It was a shock. I'll give you that. My first time fainting too. But that doesn't excuse me from what I said. Not after everything you've done for us. I don't honestly know where me and the kids would be right now if it wasn't for you." She hugged herself. "Or if I'd even still have my kids."

"You'd have them. With or without me. You're a fighter and a good mother." I started to mention the Goddess's choice again, but I decided to keep my beak shut. This was hard enough for her without adding fuel to the fire.

She gave me a sad smile. "I'd like to think so, but when I think back... I'm not so sure that would be the case. I was on my last legs when Nancy brought you into my life, Opal. You saved me. You saved all of us. And look how I repaid that."

I patted the cushion beside me. "Well, for starters, you've repaid me by becoming a darn fine partner at the shop. And by helping me out around here. A house like this is too much for just one old lady and a little girl, you know." I watched as she crossed the room toward me. "Like it or not, Kimberly, you and your kids are family now. Even in the hard times. Family is family."

And that's when the tears started. I let her cry it out, sitting on the sofa beside me and leaning into me.

It was the first time I'd ever seen the woman cry. Baby Pearl must have put her through the wringer the past few days. Not an easy victory, for sure.

Once she stopped, she looked up at me with red and swollen eyes. "Can you teach me to be a witch?"

Okay, so I hadn't expected that. I should have, but I hadn't.

"That's not something to be done lightly, you know. The Goddess will know if your heart isn't in it. And it's not something She's going to require of you. If it was, She would have chosen a witch to give

birth to Pearl."

Kimberly swallowed and wiped her eyes. "I'm sure. I've actually been thinking about it for a while now, but I knew you wouldn't want me to rush into it, so I waited. I think I need this. Not just for Pearl, either. For me too."

"Then that can be arranged." I hesitated. "You do realize that you wouldn't be able to cast spells like an elemental, right? Hedge witches can be strong, with time and determination, but they lack that elemental power that makes us Ravenswinds so... well, powerful."

"I know. But even being a hedge witch would help me understand things better, wouldn't it? Help me understand my daughter better?"

"I think maybe it would at that."

She took a deep breath. "Then that's what I want. I want to be a witch."

Now that we had that out of the way, I felt I was safe to ask my most burning question. The one my heart was aching to hear an answer to.

"Does this all mean that the three of you are coming home?"

"If you'll have us, yes." She hesitated. "Gray told me that you offered him the attic. Did you really mean that? You'd truly be okay if he moved in here?"

"I would. And Orville would too, by the way. That attic is fairly huge." That was putting it mildly, as it ran practically the entire length and breadth of the house. "If you wanted, you could all turn it into a home for your whole family. Wouldn't think it'd take all that much to put some walls up to make rooms."

Her eyes lit up. I could see the wheels turning.

"And you wouldn't mind if we added to the staircase out back to go on up to the attic?"

"Fine with me. Safer too, if you all are going to be spending a lot of time up there."

She hugged me. I hugged her back. Finally, all was right with the world again.

The killer had been caught, the church had a new—and hopefully much more pious—leader, the wedding was coming together nicely, and we were adding yet another valuable member to our family. Gray.

Now all I had to do was sew two beautiful wedding dresses. A piece of cake.

Wedding cake at that.

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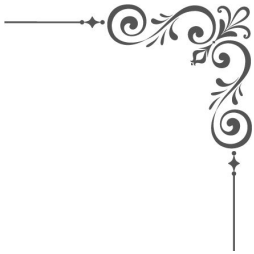

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Epilogue

June fifth. Finally. My wedding day was here.

Well, our wedding day. At least I was sharing the stress with three other people. That helped a little.

Not that Orville or Archimedes seemed all that stressed. But then, all that was really required of them was to put on their tuxedos and stand up front by the new preacher and wait for us to come down the aisle.

Grooms had it so easy. Brides? Not so much. I totally got the whole Bridezilla thing now. Sapphire wasn't quite that bad, but she was getting closer with every passing moment.

Especially as it was five in the afternoon, and the weather radar showed rain headed our way. The men folk weren't around because of the old tradition of not seeing the brides on their wedding day. Personally, I kind of thought that was a tradition started by men who didn't want to be roped into wedding day chores. Hard to do chores having to do with the wedding and not see the bride too.

That didn't mean we couldn't call them. As far as I knew there wasn't a tradition about not talking to the bride.

He answered on the first ring. "Don't worry. I'm on it."

"You got a way to turn those clouds around or something?" I mean, I'm an Air witch, and even I couldn't do that.

"Nope. But you do remember I was a Boy Scout, right? And in the military for a while, to boot? I believe in contingency plans." He was quiet for a minute. "Especially for something this important. I've waited a lifetime for this day, Opal."

"I'd love to hear about this contingency plan of yours."

He chuckled. "Sorry, it'll just have to be a surprise. Just you and Sapphire cover your dresses in plastic garbage bags if you have too, but be up on that hilltop by eleven-thirty. You have my word that this will all work out. Rain or no rain." Then he paused. "Just stay away until then, okay? We've got this."

That was asking a whole heck of a lot, and he had to know that. But what could I say? Or do, for that matter.

I looked over at Sapphire. "Orville says he has a contingency plan to deal with the weather. All we have to do is be up on the hilltop by eleven-thirty, and all will be well. According to him."

I'd expected sputtering or gnashing of teeth. What I hadn't expected was her total—well, for the most part, anyway—relaxation. It would appear that my sister had even more faith in my man than I did.

Huh.

The girls started carrying the food up around ten. When Ruby came back down smiling, I knew that whatever it was Orville had pulled out of his hat; it had worked.

Even I relaxed a bit after that. As much as was possible, anyway, what with my curiosity level so high. I really wanted to know what was going on up on top of that hill. But that wasn't going to happen until a whole lot closer to midnight.

If that time ever came. The clock was moving mighty slow right now.

By eleven o'clock, Sapphire and I were dressed and ready to go. By now, it was just the two of us down at the farmhouse. All the others were up on that hilltop waiting for us. Well, Amie was waiting at the foot of the hill with her video camera. So we weren't totally alone.

That had been our decision. The path up that hill was a very long wedding aisle. The two of us had walked that path many, many times. Every twist, every turn, every tree root was engrained in our memory.

That helped when you were walking up a heavily tree-lined path in the moonlight. Even with a full moon, that path could be dark.

Not that we had to rely on our memories tonight. We had Amie, our resident Light Witch. And tonight, she earned her title. I'd have to remember to get the spell from her later because it was nothing short of beautiful.

As the two of us walked the grassy path, the way before us glowed in a healthy white light. If I didn't know better, I'd swear there were fireflies and dragonflies involved, too, as tiny specks of the light seemed to glow and twinkle as we passed. As if each speck of brilliant light was giving us its blessing as we passed.

Just maybe, this wasn't all Amie. Just maybe, the Goddess was involved as well.

It had rained, but only briefly. It would appear the Goddess had our backs on that one too. At least until we hit the top of the hill.

The first clap of thunder came just as we crested up to the hilltop, and the accompanying lightning flash illuminated the scene brightly before us.

Orville had outdone himself.

Sapphire reached out and took my hand. "Would it be fitting if I said I loved Orville right now?"

I got that. My chest was fairly bursting right now with love for the man myself. We stood there silent for a second. Right up until the

second clap of thunder came.

"Um, I think we need to head in unless you want to get wet. I'm not sure I could stop that in time."

We took Amie's warning in the spirit it was intended. We headed in.

The 'in' was to a large party tent kind of structure. Only, this wasn't your average party tent. No ugly green or white walls here. No. None of that at all.

In fact, in the glow of the full moon, it was almost as if we were walking into the illusion of a party tent. The walls and ceilings were completely clear fabric, which allowed the blessed moon rays in.

Well, I was pretty sure they started out as completely clear fabric. Until Gray and Kimberly got ahold of them. They'd been spending a lot of time lately out at Gray's trailer, just the two of them. I'd thought maybe they had just needed some kid-free time alone together. Now, I was thinking that hadn't been the case.

They had turned the tent into a magical clearing all in itself. The walls were painted with trees and flowers. Once inside, it was hard to tell where the tent stopped and the woods actually started.

It was breathtaking.

I smiled at Kimberly and Gray and mouthed, "Thank you."

They grinned back at me and nodded. I was kind of hoping this tent would survive the night. It would only be fitting to be used again for their wedding. Not that one was planned. Yet.

Then the music started, and my mind focused on the here and now. Especially when Orville and Archimedes stepped out from behind a partition and walked over to stand before the podium.

They took their places on the pentagram, which was only possible because of the person we had found to officiate our ceremony. None other than Shaman Crowe. And yes, as it turned out, he was licensed for this kind of thing.

Orville waited until he was firmly in place before turning to look at me.

My breath caught at the sheer sight of the man. He was a handsome man, even in jeans and an old t-shirt. In a tuxedo? Goddess help me. If I felt any more love and attraction for the man, my heart really would burst. Shatter into a million pieces. I'd never thought you could love someone to the point of pain. I'd been wrong.

I took Sapphire's cue and walked slowly beside her up that aisle, between all of our standing friends and family, and felt like I was leaving the world I'd known all my life behind.

I was walking through a long doorway to a life I'd never imagined I'd ever get to live. A life of love, humor, laughter, and family. A life shared totally with the man I loved more than life itself.

My new life was waiting at the end of the aisle.
And I was more than ready.

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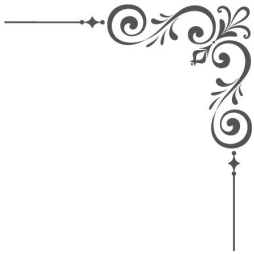

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A Very Happy Halloween Birthday

A Gemstone Coven Holiday Short 2

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By Belinda White

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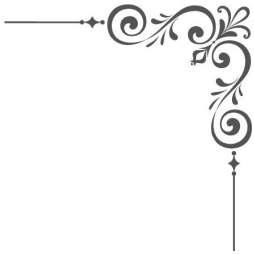

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Chapter 1

I watched as Orville tightened the last screw on the last bracket. Then he leaned back and looked up at me. “All ready for your part now.”

We’d quickly found out that little baby Pearl was a master at outsmarting baby proofing devices. So we were totally double teaming her. Orville and Gray were installing the little baby locks, and I was following along behind them and adding a little touch of magic proofing as well.

I’d kind of hoped that baby Pearl’s magical spell casting would be limited to spells she’d known in her previous life as my mother. Spells like her levitation spell, for instance. That one had been her ultimate, all-time favorite spell of them all. Kind of made sense she’d remember it, even this time around.

Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to be the case with baby Pearl. I wasn’t even sure she was casting spells. After watching her a few times, I’d swear that all it took for that little human creature was to really, really want something and focus on the want.

I truly hoped that would not become a new trend with baby witches. If so, the world at large was in for one heck of a shock. Even the more magical population.

But it was much more likely that the Goddess had made an exception with baby Pearl. Heaven knows She’d made enough other exceptions in her case. Like reusing the soul of a very powerful witch.

Helping to raise a child with my mother’s soul was... interesting... to say the least. Had its moments of adrenaline-pumping excitement too, let me tell you.

I was just happy that her birth mother had come to terms with the whole situation. That had been kind of rocky at first. But the Goddess had known what She was doing when She chose a non-witch mother for baby Pearl. Kimberly was more than a match for her.

Well, Kimberly was a match for sure. The more part was still in question. The two of them locked wills a lot. But most times, Kimberly won. And she won all the times when it came to keeping baby Pearl safe and protected. Those were the times when Kimberly wouldn’t budge.

In other words, she was the perfect mom for my mother. Goddess,

but that was complicated.

I concentrated on the task at hand and cast the magic barrier spell on the baby locks. That should do it. I hoped, anyway. If not, we'd have to start warding off rooms to baby Pearl, and that could turn into a nightmare. But if we had to, we'd do it.

Safety first. For her and the house. Us grown-ups too. There was an awful lot of power stored up in that tiny little body of hers.

The spell had barely had time to take effect when baby Pearl came toddling into the kitchen. Goddess help us, she was walking now. Hence the doubling up effort on the baby proofing. I swear that child flat out ran at times. Seems like her soul remembered how to do other things as well as magic.

Could be really interesting when she hit preschool age. Hopefully, we'd be able to reason with her by then.

That sure as heck wasn't the case right now. You just can't reason with a one-year-old.

Which brought up my next issue. Baby Pearl's birthday was coming up fast... next weekend to be exact... and I still didn't have a clue what to give her.

Oh, I had a present for her, but it simply wasn't special enough. So whenever the others asked me what I was doing for baby Pearl, I'd just smile and give a wink. "Guess you'll just have to be as surprised as she will be." That was my standard response. Little did they know that I was likely to be a little surprised myself.

As long as they didn't look in my hall closet and see the giant super-soft stuffed dragon, I'd be good. I'm sure they'd be able to put two and two together on that one.

But that dragon, while special as it had been specially made from the model of her favorite baby blanket topper, simply wasn't special enough. Not for baby Pearl. I had to do better.

And I would.

But today we baby proofed. I'd have to come up with the gift idea tomorrow. And yes, I was well aware that I was running out of time.

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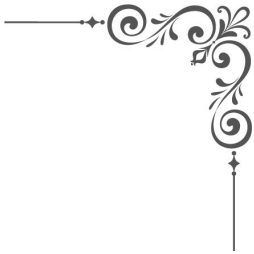

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Chapter 2

"What do you think of clowns?" Kimberly asked, turning the page in the party magazine.

I gave a slight shiver. For me, clowns were right up there with ventriloquist dolls. I thought they were creepy as heck. But this was Kimberly's show, not mine. So I kept my feelings to myself. My silence must have spoken volumes to her.

"I take it you don't like clowns, do you?"

"You'd be taking that right, yes. But Saturday isn't about me. It's about baby Pearl." I paused and looked at her. "How does she feel about clowns?"

It bothered me that I didn't know the answer to that. I'd just never been around the child when a clown had been involved. Mostly because when a clown entered the room, or a television set for that matter, I tended to leave.

Kimberly shrugged. "She's okay with them for the most part. She really didn't like that Jack in the box, though." She hesitated. "She kind of ended it, actually."

I had to hide my smile. Yes, she had. Poor clown Jack had met with a very untimely end according to Nancy, who had been the sole other witness to the clownacide. Guess maybe I did know the answer to that question, after all. "Maybe clowns aren't such a great idea."

"Yeah, I think you're right." She flipped the page again.

"You know that she isn't likely to remember the party, don't you?"

She just looked at me. "Oh, she'll remember." Then she paused. "I haven't shown you my scrapbooks, have I?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. "You do scrapbooks?" How had I not known that?

Kimberly nodded. "Yup. I try to keep one for every year in the kids' life. And each book has a special section just for their birthday party." She was quiet for a minute. "I have some making up to do for poor Mason. His first few birthdays were really sparse with parties and presents."

"Life isn't all about gifts and shindigs. You did your best. Now that the situation has changed, you'll be able to do better. He'll treasure them all the same, knowing that boy. He's a special one."

And he was too. Maybe not in the way baby Pearl was special, but

still special. There was a whole lot of love in that boy. Just, thank the Goddess, not an ounce of magic.

Even if the boy wished otherwise with just about every breath he took. Mason loved his magic. Real or not.

I glanced over at Kimberly. “You know, you might be putting way too much pressure on yourself over this. I mean, it’s Halloween, right? That child is likely to think that the whole celebration is all about her. Does she really need a special party too?”

After all, Nancy and Mason were working hard on their haunted path to the hilltop. Luckily, they’d roped Ruby and Amie to help them with it this year. Last year’s fiasco had just about done me in. But then that had more to do with having Kimberly’s water break right in the middle of it than the actual shindig itself.

But bringing my mind back on track… this whole place was going to be swarmed with people of all ages, and all in costume and having fun. Just try telling baby Pearl they weren’t here for her. Go ahead, try.

Kimberly turned a few more pages, and then finally gave a half-hearted shrug. “Okay, so maybe the party is more for me this year than for her. But I don’t just want to rely on the Halloween thing for her celebration. That kind of feels like… cheating. She needs a special time that is all about her.”

I chewed my cheek, thinking about it. “Okay. But does it have to be a themed party? What if we just had the whole family over and told everyone to give her one special gift, just from them? Mason could put on a magic show for her. Nancy could bring out Sassy.” I paused to give a shiver. That doll still gave me the creeps. “We could make the whole day about her, and then the bonfire on the hill that night would just be the icing on the cake.”

Besides, Mom had always been all about Halloween. The woman had probably insisted on being born again that night, knowing her. Sharing her birthday with All Hallows Eve would be a blessing to her. Not the curse that Kimberly seemed to think it was.

But I didn’t like to bring up the whole Mom’s soul thing too often in front of Kimberly. She was doing better with it, but there were days when she still struggled with the whole concept.

Perfectly normal in my mind. There were still days when I struggled with it too. It just wasn’t the natural order of things.

Or maybe it was. Maybe reincarnation was an everyday occurrence, and we were just none the wiser. Even if that was true, baby Pearl was still an anomaly. She bloody well remembered who and what she was. And I don’t think that had ever been the case before with a person who was born again. Of course, I could be wrong.

“An entire day of special presents just for her? You mean make the party last all day?”

I thought about it and gave a small nod. “That sounds about right. Everyone is going to want a little time with baby Pearl on her special day anyway, right? Why not come up with a timetable to give everyone their own special time slot? Seems to me that would be a lot better than all of us just sitting around the table and her opening all the presents all at once.”

Plus, the added benefit would be free babysitters for the child while we all pitched in to get the haunted trail and bonfire ready. Sounded like a win-win to me.

“Okay. At least for this year, that should work. But be thinking about something really special for her second birthday, okay? I don’t like repeating myself with parties.” Then she turned to me with a glint in her eyes. “Don’t suppose you’re willing to tell me what your special present to Pearl is? Just in case, you know, we were to duplicate it or something?”

I smiled and shook my head. “Nope. It’s only fitting that baby Pearl be the first to know what my gift is. But you have my word it won’t be a duplication of yours.” And then, because it was Kimberly, and I was in a giving mood, I added. “Besides, the gift isn’t final quite yet. I’m still working on it.”

She grinned at me. “You’re as stumped as I am, aren’t you?”

I took a deep breath and then blew it out. “No comment.”

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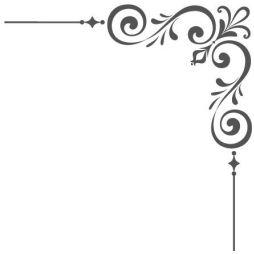

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Chapter 3

Whose bright idea was it that everyone give baby Pearl just one special present from the heart?

Oh yeah, that would be me. Way to put the pressure on myself.

I was sitting in my little living room, alone, and staring at that dang stuffed dragon. It was kind of special. I mean, it was fashioned and specially made to resemble her favorite baby toy. That was something.

It just wasn't enough. Not by half. It needed... more. Lots more.

There was shouting out in the main house, so I shoved the dragon behind my loveseat, which barely covered it, and went out to see what all the ruckus was about. I should have known.

Baby Pearl was riding her broom again. And cackling like a, well, cackling like a witch, I guess you'd say. Not that most of us really cackled anymore. But then Mom always had been old school.

Not only did her mother, Kimberly, hate it when she did that, broom riding simply wasn't a safe indoor activity. Of course, that thought just made me shiver, because it brought up the thought of outdoor riding.

That wouldn't be safe either. Just no good options for broom rides anymore. Especially when the rider isn't even one yet.

Kimberly's wild eyes looked to me for help. "Can't you do something, Opal? Unmagic the broom or something?"

I just looked at her. That might work... if that darn broom had an ounce of magic in it. Trouble was, it didn't. The magic was being supplied by the rider. But I didn't think she wanted to hear that right now, so I just went with a headshake. "Sorry."

It took both of us five minutes to catch the slippery baby on broom. You think a toddler can get around fast? Add a flying broom to the mix. We'd still be chasing her if Nancy hadn't chosen that moment to come downstairs just as baby Pearl was starting up them.

She grabbed hold of baby Pearl as she tried to fly past and lifted her from her ride. Baby Pearl stopped her cackling, and the broom dropped to the stairs under it.

Baby Pearl started squirming, trying to reach down to get her hands on the broom. Not quite possible from the height of Nancy's arms. I saw the look of concentration come into her eyes and lunged

up the stairs for the broom just as it came up off the floor.

"Oh, no you don't. That's enough broom riding for the day."

Kimberly stood behind me on the stairs and reached her hand out. I handed over the broom. I knew when I'd met my match on that one. Baby Pearl was her daughter, not mine. "That's enough broom riding for longer than today. I'm putting this somewhere safe." Her eyes met baby Pearl's pout. "You're just going to have to use your legs, little Missy. That's what the Goddess gave them to you for." She held up the broom. "This is for much, much later in life."

She stomped down the stairs, and now I had two pairs of concerned eyes looking at me.

"You don't think she'll get rid of it, do you?" Nancy whispered.

Until that very second, I'd kind of had worries of that myself, but then I remembered Kimberly's scrapbooks. No way would she destroy such an important memory in her child's life. "I think the broom is safe."

Then I looked baby Pearl in the eyes. "And you brought this on yourself, child, so don't you dare go whining about it. Babies aren't meant to ride brooms, you know. And your mom is right about the walking too. You need to exercise those legs of yours. You don't want to keep that baby fat forever, do you?"

Baby Pearl's eyes widened, and she stopped squirming. It might have been playing dirty pool, but my Mom had always been super conscious of her weight. It was a battle she had fought right up to the end. She was never what you would call fat, mind you, but she had been a mite, well, soft around the edges.

That softness on the outside had driven her nuts too. Something inside baby Pearl's brain seemed to remember that too. She had a second chance to be the svelte, trim young witch she'd always wished she could be. It wouldn't do to blow that so early in life.

But I could also see the sadness in baby Pearl's eyes as she looked after her mom. Maybe I could negotiate a truce of some kind?

It was worth a try, anyway.

Nancy took the unhappy baby back upstairs. "I'll try to distract her a bit with blocks and some dancing." Then she looked at me. "Our mini-fridge is fresh out of chocolate milk and soda, though."

Ah. That must have been why she was coming downstairs in the first place. "I'll bring some up in a few minutes."

"Thanks." And the two of them disappeared into the kids' quarters. Mason and Nancy shared a small apartment of their own. Each with their own room, mind you. Wouldn't want to give the town anything to talk about there. And they even had a nice-sized playroom between them too. For the most part, the two of them got along great, but there were times when that in-between space was much appreciated

by both of them. I had a feeling those times would become more frequent as the two of them got older.

I found Kimberly in the kitchen. She was just standing there in the center of the room, staring at the broom in her hand.

She glanced up as I came in. “A part of me wants to burn the dratted thing, just so you know.”

I nodded. I got that. “But you won’t, will you?”

Kimberly scrunched up her nose. “No. I won’t. I really, really want to, though.” Then her eyes met mine. “What am I going to do with it, Opal? It’s not safe for her to be riding it around the house. For her or us.”

She had a point. The broom handle wasn’t all that sharp, but it was still kind of a pointed object, and baby Pearl could get going pretty dang high up when she took a mind to. Going pretty dang fast too. Nothing and nobody was safe from that child on her broom.

I stared at the offending broom for a minute, thinking hard. “What if I could put a limiting spell on it? Something that would only allow her to get maybe two feet up off the ground?”

Kimberly looked at me. “You can do that?”

Truthfully, I wasn’t so sure how that would all work out, but I had an entire family of powerful witches at my back. So what I said was, “I’m a witch, ain’t I?”

She nodded slowly, then held the broom out to me. “That would be a start, anyway. I still don’t like the broom riding thing, but if we could keep her closer to the ground, it would help.”

I put the baby-sized broom in my apartment and shut the door before I took the drinks up to the kids. I wasn’t taking any chances. Baby Pearl might be able to call the broom to her, but I didn’t think she’d have much luck if there were actual walls, doors, and ceilings in the way. Good thing she’d never learned a teleportation spell, isn’t it?

But the whole time I was doing those somewhat mindless tasks, my brain was whirling.

I just might have an inkling of an idea for a very special present for my little goddaughter after all. And it all started with that tiny broom.

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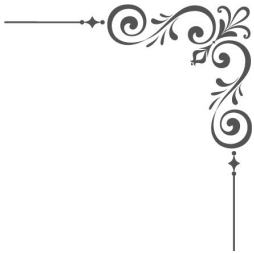

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Chapter 4

I have to admit, I was feeling pretty proud of myself. Looking over my day's handiwork, I finally felt one overly large burden lift from my shoulders.

Well, partly anyway. There was still more to be done to the present before it could be presented. Like getting that blasted limiting spell in place and working. I was truly hoping I hadn't oversold my ability on that one.

Time would tell. A family conference call might be in order. But when the ruckus outside my door started up again, I knew that would not happen right at the moment.

Nancy and Mason had done a good job of keeping baby Pearl distracted for the morning. But a rambunctious toddler can drain even the kids' energy level. Especially a rambunctious toddler with more than a touch of magic in her system.

Around noon, they called for reinforcements. Hence the ruckus. Looked like my turn at the wheel.

I glanced at the tiny broom and then carefully placed it in the closet and shut the door on it. Then I tripped the child safety lock on the door. With the magic barrier in place, that little broom would not be going anywhere anytime soon.

At least, not without a grown-up letting it out. No telling when one of us would have enough of trying to distract baby Pearl and do just that. I just hoped I wasn't the one to cave first. That caving should be saved for Kimberly. Her decision.

October in Michigan could go either way when it came to weather. So far, we'd been lucky. Especially for this late in the month. It wasn't exactly warm out, but a light jacket and we were ready to go.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the older kids rallied when they found out I was taking baby Pearl up to the hilltop. Mason loved our woods, but he wasn't allowed to roam around in them without someone older with him. He was getting close to being given permission, but at six years old... well, we didn't feel he was quite up to the responsibility of it all.

Not to mention the fact that my woods backed up into a kind of state preserve with acres upon acres of trees, grass, and plants. That had kind of been the selling point when Sapphire and I had bought the

place all those years ago. Lots of lots of magical ingredients in those acres. The ease of access made it all that much better.

Unfortunately, that also meant that there was a very real danger of losing oneself in those very magical woods. And Goddess help us, we didn't want to lose the boy.

Jackets were put on, and the four of us—me, Nancy, Mason, and little baby Pearl—started out on our walk. Technically, I could have used the harness still, but baby Pearl was quickly starting to outgrow the thing. And it was starting to be murder on my back too.

Besides, baby Pearl could walk now, and a big part of taking this hike up the hill was to help her burn off some energy. One needed energy to work magic. Less energy meant less magical mischief from the tyke.

At least, I hoped it did. Otherwise, I'd be wearing myself out in the meantime, all for nothing.

"Come on, Pearl," Nancy said, grabbing the toddler's hand. "I'll show you where the squirrels live." Then she looked up at me. "We should probably take them some food, shouldn't we?"

I nodded. "A couple ears of corn might be graciously appreciated."

She ran back into the house and came out with three ears. Made sense. One for each child. The squirrels would appreciate that. They loved it when we came up the hill with offerings of friendship. Namely, food that they didn't have to hunt down.

Baby Pearl did better than I'd expected her to. She walked the whole way up that hill. I was pretty sure the three of us would be taking turns carrying her back down it again. But at least going down was easier than coming up. That helped.

When we reached the top, the squirrels did their part in distracting baby Pearl. I'd been smart enough to pack a small backpack with a blanket to sit on and snacks and drinks for everyone. So we munched along with the squirrels. Afterward, the squirrels put on a show of daring leaps and chases to entertain the kids.

Kind of thought just maybe the Goddess put them up to that. But then again, maybe it was just their way of saying thank you and come again soon. And bring more food, of course. That last part went without saying. Well, it all went without saying. At least in words.

We stayed for about an hour before I noticed baby Pearl's nose getting a little pink. Time to head back. While I stretched and tried to get my body working again after that long on the ground, Nancy started picking up our food wrappers and water bottles. And little Mason folded up the blanket and stored it away in the backpack.

All in all, I'd say we all had our eyes off of baby Pearl for thirty seconds max. Unfortunately, that was all it took.

She was gone.

Nancy's wide eyes stared up at me in panic. My panicked eyes stared right back at her.

"Where is she?" she asked.

I motioned in a circle. "Spread out. With her little legs, she couldn't have gotten far."

I went to the left, toward the trail back down the hill, but there was no sign of her. Mason went to the right, and Nancy went straight ahead.

Unfortunately, they had the same luck I did. Which is to say, no luck at all. What the heck? Did Mom have some kind of invisibility spell I didn't know about?

A stealth spell wouldn't be this thorough. Those spells didn't really work when someone was actively looking for you. They only helped when people didn't have a clue you were where you were.

Not the case here.

We met back up in the center of the clearing, our eyes looking out all around us. No way could this be happening.

Then baby Pearl cackled, and my heart froze for just a tiny second as my eyes closed. I couldn't even look. I knew where we'd find her.

In a tree.

"She's up in a tree, isn't she?" I asked, still not looking.

"Yup," Nancy said.

I swallowed and nodded. "How high up?"

"Pretty high."

Yeah, I'd been afraid that would be the answer. I took a deep breath and looked. Very high, indeed.

Nancy and I might have been dismayed and worried. Not Mason. He was in awe.

"That's so cool. How did she do that?" And then his little face fell as he realized the answer was magic. Something he'd never have.

I didn't like the disappointment on the boy's face, but that was something I'd have to deal with later. Or better yet, let Kimberly deal with. She was doing very well in her studies to become a witch. She was starting to be able to craft spells of her own. Not exactly magic, but it could come pretty dang close.

But again, a worry for another time and another place. Even if my mind was wanting to think of anything other than the serious problem at hand.

Namely, how to get baby Pearl out of that tree.

Mason looked over at me. "You want me to climb up and get her?"

I chewed my lip, thinking. Mason might not be a witch, but he was the best tree climber in the whole family. He even topped my niece, Amie, and that was saying something. But I didn't think that was the solution here.

Oh, he could climb up to her. I had no doubt of that. But how on earth would a six-year-old boy be able to get her back down the tree safely?

No, this just had to be up to me. And I really wished I'd brought along the harness. Hard on my back or not, it sure would have come in handy for this.

For that matter, so would a ladder.

I looked up at the still cackling baby Pearl. Then I turned to the older kids. "You two go on back home. I'll handle this." Then I hesitated. "And I'd appreciate it greatly if you'd let me be there when you broke this news to Kimberly."

Nancy didn't look so sure about that. "What if you need help?"

I shook my head. "I can handle this." I fervently hoped so, anyway. "You two just head on back down and tell Kimberly the two of us will follow shortly behind you."

Nancy took a deep breath but finally nodded. "If you say so." Then she grabbed Mason's hand. "Come on, Mason. I don't think she wants us to see what comes next."

Which of course made Mason want to stay all that much more. But he was a good boy, and the two of them headed back down the hill.

I waited until I could no longer hear their footsteps before I turned my full attention back to baby Pearl. Not that I'd let my eyes drift from her tiny body for more than a second. I would not make that mistake again.

I stood as tall as I possibly could and gazed up that tree. Goddess help me, but I was about to try to reason with a one-year-old.

And I wasn't at all sure the end result wouldn't be me having to climb that bloody tree. And Nancy was right. If that did indeed come to pass, I didn't want anyone to be a witness to that.

Climbing trees was an activity for folks much younger than me.

It wouldn't be a pretty sight.

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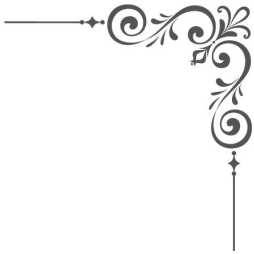

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Chapter 5

I stared up into that tree for a good three minutes, formulating my plan. Baby Pearl did her part by giving me intermittent cackles of delight.

For sure, she thought she had the upper hand here. Time to nip that thinking right in the bud.

Finally, curiosity got the better of her, and she met my gaze. Was that a teeny tiny gulp? The cackling stopped. Good. I had her attention.

"This isn't funny, you know. You are stressing your poor mother to tears. If this kind of behavior continues, I'll have no choice but to take measures. I don't think you would like that."

Her little head tilted at me, inviting me to go on.

I laughed. "You do recall I'm the daughter of the original Pearl Ravenswind, right? You truly think I don't have a few tricks of my own up my sleeve?"

Yup, a definite gulp on that one. She lifted up and then floated down to me. See, that's the thing with levitation spells, you really didn't have to have the broom for short little jaunts. Like, oh, say going up a tree.

Brooms kind of became necessary for longer trips, though. Then, they became nice little focal points for the spell. Making it a whole lot easier to control and maneuver.

Or so Mom had told me. Unfortunately, I couldn't personally attest to it. I had a genuine fear of heights. Yes. Me. Opal Ravenswind, High Priestess to the Goddess herself, had a major issue with being more than a few feet off the ground.

Looked like if I was going to have any hope of raising this one, that would have to be a fear to work on. That levitation spell sure would have come in handy today. Time to add it to my repertoire.

Once I had her little body in my hands, I put her on the ground and clamped one hand around her wrist. Then I marched her back down the hill, double-time.

I didn't trust myself to make words right now. For her part, baby Pearl was acting more than a little subdued. Hopefully, that would continue, but I wasn't about to count on it.

If I didn't put my magic where my mouth was soon, she'd figure

out I'd been mostly bluffing up there. And if that happened, Goddess help us all.

When we got back to the farmhouse, it was to find Kimberly waiting for us at the open kitchen door. Her hands were on her hips, and she did not look pleased.

"What did she do now?"

Okay, so my first assumption had been mistaken. The kids had kept quiet. That couldn't have been easy when faced with an angry Kimberly. The woman was a force to be reckoned with on a normal day. Get her angry and that force doubled.

I looked down at baby Pearl, who looked up at me with sad and pleading eyes.

"Sorry, kiddo. You brought this on yourself."

And then I told Kimberly everything. I was half expecting her anger to increase and for that anger to include a fair bit my way. That didn't happen.

The woman was full of surprises like that.

What really came as a surprise, though, was when she came up with the solution I'd been searching for the whole bloody way down from the hilltop.

Kimberly looked at baby Pearl, and then at me. "She understands a lot more than a normal baby should, doesn't she?"

I nodded. I mean, there was no point in denying it, was there?

"I thought so."

Then she stood, picked up baby Pearl and walked upstairs. When she returned, she was alone. "I think this is a conversation for us adults to have in private."

Somehow, I didn't think I was going to like what came next.

Her gaze locked with mine. "You put a magic barrier on those child locks, right?"

I felt my eyes widen as I realized where she might be going. "I did," I said slowly.

"Can you do the same with Pearl? Put some kind of magical barrier around her so that she can't work magic?"

I took a deep breath. "That's a tricky one. There are some things we could try that might work, but here's the thing. The Goddess gave her early access to her magic. Taking that away kind of seems like going against Her. And that's something I don't want to do." Like ever, but hopefully, Kimberly would understand that.

Kimberly nodded. "I thought that might be your answer." Then she squared her shoulders. "But I've been thinking about this a lot over the past few very stressful months, and I think my daughter deserves a more normal childhood. For the life of me, I can't see any reason for a baby to be able to do magic."

She took a long breath, then her tone changed to one of sheer determination. “I think it’s time I talked to the Goddess.”

My eyebrow went up on its own accord. “You know the hilltop is always open to you. The meditation gazebo too.”

Kimberly shook her head. “I’m not talking about a one-way conversation, Opal. I want to see her face-to-face. This is too important of an issue for anything else.”

Swallowing, I let my mind whirl on that for a second. “You realize that meeting the Goddess face-to-face is a very rare thing, don’t you?”

“Yes. But I also know that you have had that honor yourself.” She paused. “And I’m not asking for myself. I’m asking for Pearl. She deserves to be a baby, with everything that entails. I want that for her. I would think the Goddess would too.”

I stared at her for a long, long minute. “How’s your meditation practice coming along?”

She blinked at me. “Well enough, but why… oh.”

Glancing upward, I listened hard. No sounds of war or general upheaval. Maybe baby Pearl had been sufficiently tuckered out to do any more real damage for a while. Either that, or she knew she’d went too far this time.

Either way, Nancy should be able to handle things for a while. She was dependable like that. Besides, it wasn’t like she couldn’t come get us from the gazebo if they needed us.

Standing, I looked down at Kimberly. “I can’t guarantee this will work, you know. I still haven’t managed to get through to the Goddess every time I seek her out. She’s rather a busy entity.”

But looking at Kimberly’s face set in determination, I really hoped that She’d take the time out of her busy schedule for a quick visit.

Kimberly was at the end of her rope.

And that was a very important rope.

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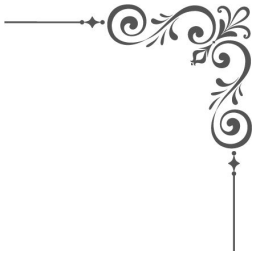

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Chapter 6

It took a while to get Kimberly in a relaxed enough state to finally reach the Goddess's treehouse. And that was just the outside of it. The question was, how did we get in?

Come to find out, we didn't have to. Even as we stood gazing up at the behemoth of a tree, the Goddess herself came walking around it. "I thought I had company."

A glance over at Kimberly showed that she was struggling. Yeah, I got that. Meeting the Goddess in person had been an eye-opening experience for me too. And I'd known her a lot longer than Kimberly had. In witch years, Kimberly was even younger than baby Pearl.

But even as I watched, her face set again. The woman was here on a mission, dang it. And she wasn't about to be awed into forgetting that.

The Goddess motioned over to a beautiful patchwork quilt that was now lying on the ground to the side of her tree. It hadn't been there a second ago. But then, things like that happened here in the Goddess's realm. "Please," she said, "won't you have a seat?"

We all settled on the quilt, which provided much more cushioning than it had any right to, and the Goddess looked over at Kimberly. "I believe you are the one who wanted to talk with me?"

Kimberly opened her mouth, but nothing came. Yup. The struggle was real and still going on. Finally, she went with a nod.

"I'm guessing this is about Pearl?"

Another nod.

The Goddess gave a huge sigh, then glanced over at me. "She's using her magic pretty heavily, isn't she?"

"You could definitely say that, yes."

"I was afraid that might be the case. I'm afraid I made a slight miscalculation when I allowed her soul to return. Pearl insisted on retaining at least a part of her memory, and I agreed." She hesitated. "Pearl will be needed before long, I'm afraid, and having her start from total scratch just didn't seem prudent."

Kimberly looked at me and then at the Goddess. "Are you saying that my daughter will be in danger soon? Because, I think you should know, I'm not okay with that."

Ah, Kimberly had found her voice. Good.

“My child, it isn’t a danger that I will put her in, you have my word. The world is a very scary place right now, and it’s getting scarier by the day. Old entities are starting to waken after centuries of slumber, and not all of them are good ones. There is a very real battle coming up. Simply standing on the side of Good versus Evil will be enough to put one in danger.” The Goddess paused. “Pearl’s magic is strong. That magic will help protect her.”

Kimberly stared at her. “But what you are saying is that war is coming. And from what I’m hearing, you’re planning to put my child on the front lines of that. I’m really not okay with that.”

“For what it’s worth, child, neither am I. But you must look on the flip side of that coin, too. Pearl’s power will give her strength and safety that others will sorely lack.”

I could tell Kimberly still wasn’t happy. Not that I blamed her. I loved baby Pearl too. And I didn’t like the idea of her spearheading a war either. Not one little bit. And I had a funny feeling that was where this was all going to lead.

Then the Goddess smiled and a warm, calming breeze caressed us. It wasn’t nearly enough.

“But that is a time years and years down the road. And I was trying to admit that I might have made a slight miscalculation in granting Pearl her wishes.” She hesitated. “A child should be allowed to have a childhood. A normal childhood. That’s why most witches don’t come into their power until they reach their teenage years.”

She stopped and gave another massive sigh. “Hence my dilemma, I’m afraid.”

Kimberly looked confused, but I understood what the Goddess was saying. All too well. Magical power, like everything else in life, got stronger with use and practice. Starting out using magic as an infant? Baby Pearl would be an incredible force of magic in her adult years. She just might make Amethyst, my niece of a light witch, look like an amateur.

And that was a very scary thought. With awesome power came awesome responsibility. My heart ached at the thought of young Pearl having to play such an integral part in the world’s game. I truly wished it could pass her by. But that wasn’t to be her fate. It wasn’t to be any of our fates, apparently.

The Goddess straightened up and reached out for Kimberly’s hand. “I’ll have a talk with Pearl. Surely there is some kind of compromise that we can come to.”

Kimberly’s face cleared at the Goddess’s touch. “That would be lovely.”

Something told me that touch was more than just a passing one. I had a very strong feeling, from Kimberly’s much more relaxed stance,

that much of our earlier conversation had been wiped from her mind. Too much information for a young mother to have to live with. And knowing it was coming wouldn't change things one little bit.

I kind of wished I'd get one of those touches myself.

But I wasn't so lucky.

The Goddess needed me to know. I had to help baby Pearl prepare.

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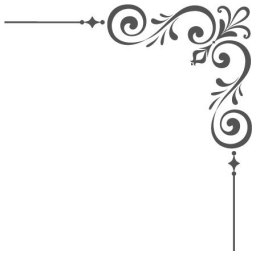

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Chapter 7

The next few days were quiet. A little too quiet, if you ask me.

Baby Pearl was a whole different baby entirely. At least, as far as it went with magic use. The magic just... stopped. No levitating, no random objects flying through the air, nothing magical at all.

And the tiny baby witch's broom in my closet stopped banging against the door, so that was a good sign that baby Pearl had stopped calling it.

Don't get me wrong, it was a welcome relief from a few angles. It was also kind of worrisome. In a kind of a calm before the storm kind of way. I just wasn't so sure how long my mother's soul could go without putting her powers to use.

We'd find out. Maybe the Goddess had used a little of that memory-altering power of hers on baby Pearl. But somehow, I didn't think that was the case. I just think baby Pearl had been given notice. She and the Goddess must have struck a powerful bargain.

How long it would last was anyone's guess. I know I certainly didn't have a clue.

I stared down at the overly large rainbow-colored stuffed dragon that I had modified as a broom cover. The idea had been a good one... back when baby Pearl was riding that broom of hers. I mean, having the somewhat pointed end covered in soft fluff had to help with the safety aspect of things, right?

But now that the broom riding had stopped... well, giving her this gift would just seem to be a bit too tempting for it to all start up again, now wouldn't it? I couldn't do that to Kimberly. Or the rest of the household either.

Orville came through from the bedroom on his way to work. He took one look at the dragon and gave a low whistle. "That was your gift for Pearl, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "It was. Now it isn't."

He picked up the dragon and turned it over. "You could always sew this hole back up, couldn't you?"

"Yes." And I would too. But then it would just be an overly large stuffed dragon. Not all that special of a gift. And I wanted special, dang it. But where would I come up with a super special gift in a matter of hours? Today was Halloween, and tonight was the big party.

I'd told Kimberly I was saving my gift for last.

At least that bought me a little time.

I glanced up at Orville. "What are you giving her?"

He grinned at me. "I bought season passes to the indoor playground over in Oak Hill. I figured all the kids could benefit from that. And Pearl wouldn't be going by herself, anyway." He saw my look and shook his head. "Don't worry, they have a toddler-only area for the tiny ones."

Well, all right then. That was a pretty decent gift. The other kids would like it too. I'd seen those big blow-up slides and bouncy houses that place had. Looked like a blast. If I was a few years younger, of course.

Or if one were set up in private in the backyard and not out in public. Might be something to think about for baby Pearl's second birthday.

WHILE EVERYONE ELSE took turns spending time with baby Pearl and giving her their special first birthday gift, I helped get the Haunted Hilltop Trail and Bonfire ready for the night's festivities. To give the girls credit, there wasn't a lot left to do. It was pretty much all ready to go.

At six o'clock when the trick or treating hours started up, our little farmhouse got very, very busy. Cars lined up on the road leading to our house as they unloaded entire carloads of kids (and a fair few adults) for the short trail walk.

We'd gotten smarter this year and had sold advance tickets. Not that we were out to make a profit, because we weren't. But having the money upfront allowed us to not go in the hole when it came to buying the candy and treat bags. Everyone with a ticket got to walk the trail, enjoy cupcakes and Halloween goodies in the bonfire's warmth on the hilltop, and leave with a bag filled with a night's worth of trick or treating candy.

All in all, they got a bargain. And we almost came out even. A win for everyone.

I have to say this year went much better than last year's event. Of course, I hadn't been around for much of the event last year. Kimberly's water breaking right at the start of it kind of took care of that. It surprised me to find that it was actually a lot of fun.

And if it helped cement the Ravenswind name in a favorable light in the community? All the better.

By ten o'clock, we were ushering the last of the trail walkers back down the hill and to their waiting cars. Then we all met back up on the hilltop for the final part of baby Pearl's birthday bash and, yes, the

eventual cleanup.

I made my way over to stand beside Kimberly. After thinking long and hard, and brushing up on a certain spell, I knew what I wanted my gift to baby Pearl to be. But I would not go there without Kimberly's permission. If she didn't give it, well, then a stuffed dragon it would be.

But she nodded.

Taking a few deep, fear-busting breaths, I picked up my broom and made my way to the center of the clearing. I was really hoping I wasn't about to make a fool out of myself.

Straddling my broom, I reached out for baby Pearl and sat her in front of me. Then I nodded at the others and took off.

Well, I say took off. It happened a lot slower than you would think. It took more than a few seconds for my courage to get to the point to actually fly. Once we were well and truly in the air, I found the fear wasn't nearly as bad as I had thought it would be. Part of that was because I had other things to concentrate on.

There is a very good reason most witches don't fly on brooms. It's very, very hard. You have to keep the levitation spell going at the same time you are giving the air directional instructions. Plus, of course, any time that you are going near where the general public might see you, there was the added magical drain of a stealth spell.

Lucky for me, we weren't going far enough afield for me to have to worry about the stealth thing. I knew my limitations. And I was at them with just the levitation and air spells.

Baby Pearl had the time of her life. Goddess bargain or no, I know that my mom was fully present on that ride. I'd never felt closer to her. But all good things must come to an end.

Just before we landed, I whispered into baby Pearl's ear. "No flying on your own. But if you can hold to that, I'll try to see that this becomes a full moon thing for us. Deal?"

Baby Pearl's head swiveled back to look at me over her shoulder, and she gave me a wink. I was sure hoping that was a 'yes' wink instead of a 'we'll see' wink.

We landed on a much cleaner hilltop. The others had been busy. As soon as our feet hit the ground, a much-relieved Kimberly took baby Pearl from my arms. Then she and the older kids started down the hill.

Mason looked over his shoulder at me. "Can I get a broom ride on my birthday? Or is that just for witches?"

I looked at Kimberly. Her son, her call. She nodded.

"You've got it, kiddo." Nancy opened her mouth, but I beat her to it. "And yes, Nancy, you too. But just on birthdays, okay?"

They nodded and left.

Ruby, Amie, and the others soon followed. Finally, there were only two people on the top of that hill.

Me and my man.

And I wasn't sure I liked the look he was giving me.

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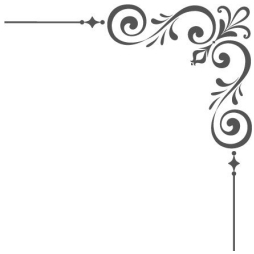

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Chapter 8

Orville looked from me to the broom and back again. “Is there a weight limit on that thing?”

See? I told you I didn’t like that look. I just looked at him. It had been a rather taxing night, and I was looking forward to my nice comfy bed. And, yes, maybe a little snuggle time with my man. This being married thing had its perks.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. Who was I to say no to those puppy dog eyes he was giving me?

“It would have to be a short ride. Flying a broom takes a lot out of a witch.”

That got a frown. “Then never mind. I don’t want to overwork you.”

I grinned at him. “I didn’t say no.” I picked up the broom and straddled it, then jerked my head behind me. “Hop on.”

He did.

It was a beautiful fall night up there in the sky. We didn’t stray much from the clearing area, so the treetops pretty much covered us from being seen. That meant a lot, as I didn’t have to do the stealth spell. That helped. A little, anyway.

It also meant that we needed to pretty much go in circles, which took a little more concentration than just going straight from point a to point b. As I’ve said before, flying a broom is hard work. Remember that.

Orville’s chest was right up against my back, and the warmth coming off him felt really good in the slightly chilly air. He leaned his chin on my shoulder.

“This is super romantic, just so you know.”

“If you start singing A Whole New World, I’m turning this broom right around.”

He laughed. “No danger of that.”

Come to find out, the whole singing thing would have been much better than what he did do next.

For what it was worth, Orville was right about the whole romantic thing. The two of us truly alone, gliding through the air with the full moon raining its blessings down on us. Yes, my thoughts strayed.

Not a good thing when you're that high off the ground. But I was holding it together.

Until he kissed my neck.

Okay, spoiler alert. My neck is like a secret tunnel to my heart... and other parts of my more nether regions. Orville knew that, too, so I totally put the blame for what happened next squarely on him.

Distracted from the kiss, I closed my eyes to savor the feeling of the broom beneath us, the gentle breeze on my face, and yes, the kiss itself.

Only for a few seconds. But that was all it took.

We crashed.

Not on the ground, either. That would have been better. No. Without my concentration in guiding the flight of the broom with the air currents, I rode us straight into a tree.

At the first touch of the first limb, my eyes came flying open, but it was far too late. The limb swept us off the broom, and we were left hanging on for dear life.

The broom, unfortunately, kept going for a few feet before falling to the ground.

Orville was the first to recover. He maneuvered himself up onto the offending limb, then helped me up beside him.

I noticed he was shaking. At first, I thought it was the shivers of shock setting in. Should have known better than that. My man was pretty much unshakable in crisis situations. Kind of came with being sheriff for so many years.

A glance over at him was all it took. He couldn't hold the laughter in any longer. The clearing below us rang out with it. I didn't think he quite grasped the severity of our current situation. There was no way, as tired as I was, that I was going to be of any help getting us down from that tree.

And one glance down told me it would not be a simple climb down, either. I just really hoped firemen would not have to be called.

Orville shook his head and pulled me in close to his side. At least the branch we'd landed on was big and strong enough to support both of our weight. Good thing, too, as we might be on it for a while.

"You gonna make the call, or am I?" I asked. I would have asked how we were going to explain being stuck up here, but when I thought about it, the explanations were going to be more than apparent. At least to the family.

"Neither, I don't think," he said. "You can call the broom to us, right? I mean, if Pearl can do it..."

Well, yeah, but baby Pearl hadn't expended as much magic as I had tonight when she did it. I was tapped out. But just as I was opening my mouth to tell him the grim news, he reached into his

pocket, grinning.

When I saw what he pulled out, I was grinning too. One of our stored power crystals.

“You are such a Boy Scout.”

“Are you complaining? Now?”

“Nope. Just stating a fact.”

I reached for the crystal, but he closed his hand around it.

“Do you think we could stay up here for a while longer? It might not be a broom, but it’s still pretty romantic. You. Me. The light of the full moon...” Then he bent down and kissed my neck.

The world disappeared again. In a good way this time.

Want more Opal, Orville, and their gang? Continue the fun in Witch Reborn Book 4: Witch of an Ex.

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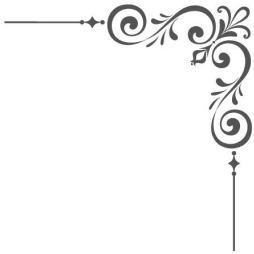

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